

# AN ORESTEIA

ANNE CARSON



AGAMEMNON BY AISKHYLOS

ELEKTRA BY SOPHOKLES

ORESTES BY EURIPIDES

# *An* ORESTEIA

*Translated by*

ANNE CARSON

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*for Alice Cowan,  
my first Greek teacher*

# Table of Contents

Title Page

AGAMEMNON

INTRODUCTION

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

ELEKTRA

INTRODUCTION

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

ORESTES

INTRODUCTION

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

A NOTE FROM THE TRANSLATOR

ALSO BY ANNE CARSON

Notes

Copyright Page

# AGAMEMNON

by Aiskhylos

## INTRODUCTION

It's like watching a forest fire. Big, violent, changing every minute and the sound not like anything else.

Every character in *Agamemnon* sets fire to language in a different way. Klytaimestra is a master of technologies, starting with the thousand-mile relay of beacons that brings news of the fall of Troy all the way from Asia to her in the first scene. She reenacts the relay in language that is so brilliant and so aggressive, she is like a conqueror naming parts of the world she now owns. She goes on to own everyone in the play—the chorus by argument and threat, Agamemnon by flattery and puns, Aigisthos by sexy cozening—with one exception. Cassandra she cannot conquer. Cassandra's defense, which is perfect, is silence. When Klytaimestra demands to know whether this foreign girl speaks Greek, Cassandra does not answer—for 270 lines (in the original text). Klytaimestra exits.

There is no reason why Cassandra should speak Greek. She is a Trojan princess who has never been away from home before. In fact, she will turn out to command all registers of this alien tongue—analytical, metaphoric, historical, prophetic, punning, riddling, plain as glass. But Apollo has cursed Cassandra. Her mind is foreign in a much deeper way. Although she sees everything past, present and future, and sees it truly, no one ever believes what she says. Cassandra is a self-consuming truth. Aiskhylos sets her in the middle of his play as a difference you cannot grasp, a glass that does not give back the image placed before it.

As a translator, I have spent years trying to grasp Cassandra in words. Long before I had any interest in the rest of *Agamemnon*, I found myself working and reworking the single scene in which she appears with her language that breaks open. I got some fine sentences out of it and thought to publish them, but this seemed vain. I dreamed of her weirdly mixed with the winters of my childhood and imagined a play where someone like Björk would sing wild translingual songs while sailing down a snowy river of ancient Asia Minor. But other people have tried such things and anyway the play already exists. It is

*Agamemnon.*

Eventually I accepted that what is ungraspable about Cassandra has to stay that way. Aiskhylos has distilled into her in extreme form his own method of work, his own way of using his mind, his way of using the theater as a mind. The effect is well (if inadvertently) described by the painter Francis Bacon, who (talking about his own method of painting) says:

*It seems to come straight out of what we choose to call the unconscious with the foam of the unconscious locked around it ...*

Francis Bacon makes his paintings, as Cassandra makes her prophecies, by removing a boundary in himself. He wants to access something more raw and real than the images articulated by his conscious mind. Interestingly, he finds reading Aiskhylos especially conducive to this end:

*Reading translations of Aeschylus ... opens up the valves of sensation for me.*

Perhaps this is because Aiskhylos knows how to get these valves open too. Not just in the Cassandra scene but everywhere in *Agamemnon* there is a leakage of the metaphorical into the literal and the literal into the metaphorical. Images echo, overlap and interlock. Words are coined by pressing old words together into new compounds—"dayvisible" (54), "dreamvisible" (308), "manminded" (9), "thricegorged" (1116), "godaccomplished" (1127). Metaphors come, go and reappear as fact; for example, the figurative "dragnet of allenveloping doom" that the Greeks threw over Troy (267) materializes as the very real "dragnet—evil wealth of cloth" in which Klytaimestra snares Agamemnon to kill him (1138–39). Real objects are so packed with meanings both literal and metaphoric that they explode into symbol, like the red carpet or cloth over which Agamemnon walks as he enters his house (608–49).<sup>1</sup>

Francis Bacon says that his own images "work first upon sensation then slowly leak back into the fact,"<sup>2</sup> and he speaks of a need to "return fact onto the nervous system in a more violent way."<sup>3</sup> He

means a violence deeper than subject matter:

*When talking about the violence of paint, it's nothing to do with the violence of war. It's to do with an attempt to remake the violence of reality itself ... the violence of suggestions within the image which can only be conveyed through paint ... We nearly always live through screens—a screened existence. And I sometimes think, when people say my work looks violent, that I have been able to clear away one or two of the veils or screens.*<sup>4</sup>

This violence is intrinsic to Aiskhylos' style. He uses language the way Bacon uses paint, especially in the Cassandra scene where he stages the working of her prophetic mind—the veils, the screens, the violence, the clearing away. She is a microcosm of his method.

Francis Bacon thinks of himself as a realist painter, although he admits this requires him “to reinvent realism.”<sup>5</sup> Aiskhylos is a realist too. They both have an instinct “to trap the living fact alive” in all its messy, sensational, symbolic overabundance. Let's return to the red carpet that Aiskhylos unrolls as if in slow motion in the famous carpet scene (608–49) that carries Agamemnon into his house and his death. This amazing red object can be interpreted as blood, wealth, guilt, vengeance, impiety, female wile, male *hybris*, sexual seepage, bad taste, inexhaustible anger and an action invented by Klytaimestra to break Agamemnon's will. As a woven thing, it reminds us that women are the ones who weave and that weaving is an analogy for deceptiveness. Klytaimestra will use cloth again when she snares Agamemnon to kill him. As a red or purple-red object, the cloth is bloodlike but also vastly expensive and ruined by trampling. Agamemnon fears that this action will look insolent or impious or both—he feels all eyes upon him. As a cause of dispute between husband and wife, the red cloth unfolds her power to master him in argument and outwit him in battle. For this is a battle, and when he enters the house, he has lost it. Notice he enters in silence while she comes behind. Then she pauses and turns at the doorway to deliver one of the most stunning speeches of the play (“There is the sea and who shall drain it dry?” 650ff.). It is a truism of ancient stagecraft that the one who controls the doorway controls the tragedy, according to Oliver Taplin.<sup>6</sup> In *Agamemnon* this is unmistakably Klytaimestra. The carpet scene is like a big red arrow Aiskhylos has painted on the play to underscore the fact.

Violence in *Agamemnon* emanates spectacularly from one particular word: justice. Notice how often this word recurs and how many different angles it has. Almost everyone in the play claims to know what justice is and to have it on their side—Zeus, Klytaimestra, Agamemnon, Aigisthos and (according to Cassandra) Apollo. The many meanings of the word *justice* have shaped the history of the house of Atreus into a gigantic double bind. No one can stop the vicious cycle of vengeance that carries on from crime to crime in its name. The bloodyfaced Furies are its embodiment. I don't think Aiskhylos wants to clarify the concept of justice in any final way, although lots of readers have seen this as the intention of his *Oresteia* overall. So far as *Agamemnon* goes, no definition is offered. The play shows that the word makes different sense to different people and how blinding or destructive it can be to believe your "justice" is the true one. This is not a problem with which we are unfamiliar nowadays. As Cassandra says, "I know that smell" (886, 983).

## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

(in order of appearance)

WATCHMAN

CHORUS *of old men of Argos*

KLYTAIMESTRA *wife of Agamemnon*

MESSENGER

AGAMEMNON *king of Argos*

KASSANDRA *Trojan princess, prophet, prisoner of war*

AIGISTHOS *paramour of Klytaimestra*

SETTING: *The play is set at the palace of Agamemnon, also known as the house of Atreus, in Argos. Agamemnon has been away for more than ten years at the Trojan War. It is the middle of the night. A watchman is lying*



*on the palace roof.*

WATCHMAN : Gods! Free me from this grind!

It's one long year I'm lying here watching waiting watching waiting  
—propped on the roof of Atreus, chin on my paws like a dog.

I've peered at the congregation of the nightly stars—bright powerful  
creatures blazing in air,

the ones that bring summer, the ones that bring winter, the ones  
that die out, the ones that rise up—and I watch I watch I watch for  
this sign of a torch, a beacon light sending from Troy the news that  
she is captured.

Those are the orders I got from a certain manminded woman.

But whenever I take to my restless dreamless dewdrenched bed

I cannot close my eyes—fear stands over me instead of sleep.

And whenever I think to sing or hum a tune to stay awake then my  
tears fall.

This house is in trouble.

The good days are gone.

How I pray for change! A happy change. A light in darkness.

*[Light appears.]*

Hold on! There you are! Fire in the night! Blazing like day!

You make me dance for joy!

I must send news to Agamemnon's wife to rise from bed, to shout  
aloud

for this amazing light—if Troy is really taken as the beacons seem  
to say.

I myself will start the dancing.

For if *they* are in luck, *I* am in luck—we're throwing triple sixes!

Oh how I long to see the master of this house and touch his hand!

For all the rest, I keep silent. Ox on my tongue.

This house if it could talk would tell a tale.

But me—I talk to those who know and then

I lose my memory.

CHORUS : Ten years now since Priam's one great adversary—

Menelaos plus Agamemnon: twin royal

power sanctioned by Zeus—

sent forth from this land a thousand ships to fight their fight.

Loud was the cry—they screamed “War!” as eagles scream when they  
wheel in air and thrash their wings for grief high above the nests of  
children lost.

All that care lost.

But some god hears the cry, some Apollo or Zeus or Pan, and sooner  
or later sends down vengeance.

So it was Zeus—god of host, guest, strangers, hospitality—sent the  
sons of Atreus against Alexander for the sake of a woman with too  
many husbands.

There were heavy struggles and knees pressed in the dust, Trojan  
spears smashed and Greek spears smashed.

Now things are where they are.

And will end where they're destined to end.

Not by burning things in secret, not by libations poured in secret, not  
by tears will you turn away the wrath of offerings that were unholy.

But we, old and useless as we are, left behind by the army, bide our  
time here, propped on childstrength.

The marrow leaps not in our breast.

Ares is absent.

Old age goes its way withered, on three legs, weak as a child or a  
dream dayvisible, wavering.

But you, daughter of Tyndareus, Queen Klytaimestra, what's  
happened, what news, what rumor, what message persuades you to  
send round orders for sacrifice?

All the altars in the city high and low, heavenly and earthly, blaze  
with offerings.

Everywhere torches shoot up to the sky, coaxed by holy unguents and  
royal oils.

Tell what you can. Heal my anxiety for it flashes from darkness to  
hope and chews me up inside.

Power comes into me!

I am breathed full by the gods of strong song: how the two Atreid  
kings, the twin command of Greece, were sent with spears against the  
land of Troy by this one omen—the king of birds appearing to the  
king of ships.

A black eagle and behind it a white one, whirling in the open air to  
drop upon a pregnant hare.

They ate the hare, they ate her womb, they ate her unborn young.  
Sing sorrow, sorrow, but let the good prevail.

Then the prophet of the army saw the haredevouring birds were two,  
saw the warmongering Atreids were two, and he unfolded the omen:  
*In time this expedition will capture Priam's city, will slaughter all its cattle  
before its walls.*

*Only let no hatred from the gods darken down upon this army—this bridle  
forced onto the mouth of Troy.*

*For holy Artemis you know feels pity and anger at the predators of Zeus*

*who fell upon a cringing hare.  
She hates the feast of the eagles.*  
Sing sorrow, sorrow, but let the good prevail.

*Gracious as she is to the tender cubs of lions, delighting as she does in  
savage beasts still helpless at the breast, she calls out for this omen to be  
realized—both its favor and its blame.*  
*But I pray Apollo will prevent her raising adverse winds to keep the Greeks  
from sailing: she wants to instigate another sacrifice, a lawless joyless  
strifeplanting sacrifice that will turn a wife against a husband.*  
*For there lives in this house a certain form of anger, a dread devising  
everrecurring everremembering anger that longs to exact vengeance for a  
child.*

So spoke Kalchas to the kings.  
Sing sorrow, sorrow, but let the good prevail.

Zeus! whoever Zeus is—if he likes this name I'll use it—measuring  
everything that exists I can compare with Zeus nothing except Zeus.  
May he take this weight from my heart.  
The god who was great before Zeus is not worth mentioning now.  
The one who came after that is past and gone.  
Zeus is the victor! Proclaim it:  
bull's-eye!

Zeus put mortals on the road to wisdom when he laid down this law:  
*By suffering we learn.*  
Yet there drips in sleep before my heart a griefremembering pain.  
Good sense comes the hard way.  
And the grace of the gods (I'm pretty sure) is a grace that comes by  
violence.

So then the captain of the Greek ships, blaming no prophet, chose to  
veer along with the blasts of fortune.  
His men could not sail, his men were starving, on the shore of Chalcis  
in the region of Aulis where the roaring tides go back and forth.

Winds from the north came bringing idle time they did not want,  
bringing hunger and days at anchor enough to drive men mad, sparing  
neither ships nor cables, every minute longer than the last, grinding  
this flower of Greek men to nothing.  
And the seer cried out *Artemis!*—an answer more bitter than the  
question.  
The sons of Atreus smote the ground and wept.

And Agamemnon spoke:

*Hard for me to disobey.*

*Hard for me to cut down my own daughter, prize of my house, defiling a  
father's hand with a girl's blood at the altar.*

*Which of these is apart from evil?*

*How can I desert my ships and fail my allies?*

*Their desperation cries out for a sacrifice to change the winds, a girl must  
die.*

*It is their right.*

*May the good prevail!*

Then he put on the yoke of Necessity.

His mind veered toward unholiness, his nerve turned cold.

It is delusion makes men bold, knocks them sideways, causes grief.

Sacrificer of his own daughter he became.

To further a war fought for a woman.

To pay off his ships.

Her prayers and cries of *Father!* her young life they reckoned at zero,  
those warloving captains.

Her father said a prayer and bid them seize her high above the altar  
like a goat with her face to the ground and her robes pouring around  
her.

And on her lovely mouth—

to check the cry that would have cursed his house—he fixed a bridle.

Her robe fell to the ground.

She cast a glance at each of her killers, like a figure in a painting  
speaking with her eyes, for she used to sing to them around her  
father's table.

blessing their libation in her pure girl's voice—

what happened then I did not see and cannot tell.

Let's just say Kalchas was no liar.

Justice tips her scales so that we learn by suffering.

But the future—who knows? It's here soon enough.

Why grieve in advance?

Whatever turns up, I hope it's happy—

*[Enter KLYTAIMESTRA.]*

in accord with *her* wishes, our one-woman citadel and bulwark.

I am here to reverence your power, Klytaimestra.  
When the king is away one must honor the queen.  
So you got good news?  
You're optimistic?  
Tell me, unless you don't want to.

KLYTAIMESTRA : Good news. Joy surpassing all your hopes!  
The Greeks have captured Priam's town!

CHORUS : What do you say? I can't take it in!

KLYTAIMESTRA : Troy belongs to us! Clear?

CHORUS : My tears fall for joy.

KLYTAIMESTRA : Your eye is loyal.

CHORUS : And is there proof? Have you evidence?

KLYTAIMESTRA : I have. Unless some god fooled me.

CHORUS : You're persuaded by visions in dreams?

KLYTAIMESTRA : I would not trust a mind asleep.

CHORUS : Some rumor then?

KLYTAIMESTRA : You think me a child?

CHORUS : When was the city destroyed?

KLYTAIMESTRA : In the night, this past night.

CHORUS : What messenger could come so fast?

KLYTAIMESTRA : Hephaistos, god of fire! He sped forth a blazing flame from Ida!

Beacon after beacon as the fire messenger moved from Ida to the rock of Lemnos to the crag of Athos third, and skimming high above the sea it shot across like joy, the burning pine torch as another sun, to the watcher on Makistos, who delayed not, nor was he asleep, so the beacon sent its sign to sentinels of Messapion who lit a heap of heather and sped the message on. Not yet growing dim

it leapt the plain of Asopos right as a moon to the cliff of Kithairon

and roused a successor of sending flame, which the watchers did not ignore but made an even bigger blaze that flashed over the Gorgon's lake and reached Mount Aigi planktos urging the mandate of fire further.

Then they kindled a huge beard of flame that overleapt the Saronic Gulf and swooped down bright upon the peak of Arachnaïos, nextdoor neighbor to us here, and plunged at last onto the roof of Atreus—this fire

that traveled all the way from Ida.

This was my lightbringing strategy, torch to torch over the entire course.

Victory for both the first and the last.

Such is the proof and evidence I offer you, sent by my husband from Troy to me personally.

CHORUS : To the gods I will give thanks, lady, later. But tell me your whole story uninterrupted. I am amazed.

KLYTAIMESTRA : Troy is ours on this day. Within that city, I imagine, sounds a cry that does not blend—oil and water poured together do not like each other, you could say, they stand aloof.

So the voices of vanquished and victor are distinct upon the ear.

Some fall on the bodies of their husbands, fathers, brothers and cry out grief from throats no longer free.

The others, famished after allnight battle, search for any breakfast they can find. No billets, no order, just chance.

But quartered now in captured Trojan homes, escaped from frost and dew, they'll sleep like happy men the whole night through without a watch.

And if only they reverence the gods and temples of that city these captors will not fall captive in turn.

Let no mad impulse strike the army to ravish what they should not, overcome by greed. They're not home yet.

Yet even if they make it home without offending gods the agony of those who died may wake again—I pray no sudden shift to evil.

Such are my woman words.

May the good prevail.

Unambiguously.

I'm ready for blessings, *many* blessings.

CHORUS : Woman, you talk like a sensible man.

Now that I've heard your proofs—and they're good proofs—I shall address the gods with gratitude for our success.

O Zeus king, O night of glory you have thrown over the towers of Troy  
a net so vast no man could overleap it, a dragnet of all-enveloping  
doom.

I reverence great Zeus, the god of host and guest who bent his bow  
against Paris and did not miss.

People talk about “the stroke of Zeus.”

Trace the meaning.

Zeus acts as Zeus ordains.

Do you think the gods ignore a man who steps on holy things?

That man is impious whose daring goes beyond justice, who packs his  
house with wealth in excess.

Now me, I’m a moderate person.

But a man of excess has no shelter.

He kicks the altar of Justice out of sight.

Persuasion drives him on—she is child of ruin.

There is no cure. The damage is plain—it shines like bad bronze, black  
on the touchstone.

Like a boy lost in dreams such a man brings disgrace on his city.

No god hears his prayers and if you befriend him, Justice will take  
you down.

Such a man is Paris, who came to the house of Atreus and outraged  
his host by stealing his wife—

Helen who bequeathed to her people clang of shields, press of spears,  
throng of ships.

Helen who brought ruin to Troy instead of a dowry.

Lightly, lightly, she went through the gates and the seers wailed  
aloud:

*Alas for the house! Alas for the house and the men of the house!*

*Alas for the marriage bed and the way she loved her husband once!*

There is silence there: he sits alone, dishonored, baffled, mute.

In his longing for what is gone across the sea a phantom seems to rule  
his house.

Any image of her is hateful to him. Without her eyes all Aphrodite is  
gone.

Dreams bring him grief or delusional joy—dream-visible she slips  
through his hands and never comes back down the paths of sleep.

Such is the sorrow throughout that house.

But grief sits at the hearth of every house where a man sailed off to  
war.

Many things pierce a woman's heart: in place of the man she sent out  
she knows she'll get back a handful of ash.

Ares who exchanges bodies for gold, Ares who holds the scales of war,  
sends home to the wife the dust of her man packed in an easy little  
urn.

And the lament goes: *What a master of battle he was!*  
*How beautifully he died!* while some people snarl under their breath *All*  
*for the sake of another man's wife!*

in resentment against the Atreidai, those champions of justice.  
And what about those who lie *over there*—under the ground at Troy,  
planted in enemy soil?

The citizens' talk is heavy with anger. They want to see a penalty  
paid.

I'm anxious—I'm not sure what lurks in the dark.

Certainly the gods see all this killing.

And the Furies destroy a man who prospers unjustly, they grind his  
life away to nothing.

Dangerous to be big or famous—there strikes the thunderbolt of Zeus!

I prefer to remain obscure.

I'm no sacker of cities!

Let me keep my little life to myself.

But this beacon sends rumor racing through the town.

Is it true? Who knows? Some lie sent by gods?

What man is so childish or daft that his mind takes fire at news of a  
beacon then falls to despair if a word is changed?

On the other hand isn't it just like a woman to want to rejoice before  
anything is clear.

The female skin is much too porous.

And her gossip dies in a day.

Well, soon we'll know about these lights and fires and beacons,  
whether they're true or just some fantasy.

But look, I see a messenger coming from the shore, branches of olive  
on his head.

Covered in thirsty dust.

This man will make things clear—using words, not fire and smoke.

He'll tell us whether to celebrate or—*or what* I don't like to say.

[Enter MESSENGER.]

MESSENGER : I greet you, ground of my fathers, land of Argos.



In this tenth-year light I come to you.  
Many hopes are shattered, one is left:  
I never dreamed that at my death I'd be buried in the place I love best.

Rejoice my homeland, rejoice light of the sun, and you highest Zeus and you Pythian Apollo—may you launch no more arrows against us.

You were hostile enough on the banks of Skamander, Apollo, now our savior!

I greet all the gods here, especially Hermes patron of messengers.

You who sent us out, welcome us home, this remnant of the army.

O royal halls, O beloved roof, O holy seats and gods that face the sun, receive your king with glad eyes at last.

He is come, bringing light in darkness, Agamemnon.

Welcome him well for he deserves it, he has dug up Troy with the shovel of Zeus, the shovel of Justice.

The soil of Troy is worked down to nothing.

Her altars are vanished, her temples are gone.

The seed of the land is utterly desolate.

Such a yoke did our king throw around Troy!

And now he is home, a blessed man, worthy of honor beyond all the living.

Neither Paris nor Troy can boast their deed was greater than their suffering.

That rapist-robber lost his plunder and razed his father's house to the ground.

Double the price did the sons of Priam pay for their crime.

CHORUS : Glad welcome to you, messenger of the army.

MESSENGER : Glad indeed. If gods want me to die, I'm ready now.

CHORUS : Did longing for your home afflict you there?

MESSENGER : Oh yes, oh yes, so that my eyes are filled with tears.

CHORUS : A sweet affliction then.

MESSENGER : How so?

CHORUS : The feeling was reciprocal.

MESSENGER : You mean you longed for the army?

CHORUS : Oh often we sighed from a dark heart.

MESSENGER : Why dark?

CHORUS : Silence is the only safe answer to that.

MESSENGER : You've come to fear someone?

CHORUS : Let me borrow your words: I'm ready to die.

MESSENGER : Yes, but it's over now.

And as for all that happened all those years—some of it happy, some of it not—well, who is free from suffering except the gods?

Were I to tell you our hardships—the miserable quarters, narrow gangways, lousy beds and how we groaned on days there was no food!—but it was worse onshore.

Our beds right up against the enemy walls. Rain from the sky, dew from the ground soaking us perpetually, rotting our clothes, filling our hair with vermin.

I could tell you stories of winter so cold it killed the birds in the air.

Or summer heat when the sea at noon lay without a crease—

but why bewail this? Our toil is past. Over.

The dead do not care to rise again.

Why should I count them?

Why pick at old wounds? Goodbye grief!

For us, this remnant of army, it feels like a victory!

So here is our boast: we took Troy finally and nailed plunder to the walls of Greece to glorify our gods.

Praise the city and the generals, you who hear this.

And the grace of Zeus that brought the thing to pass.

That's my whole story.

CHORUS : You prove me wrong, I don't deny.

Never too old to learn.

But all this concerns Klytaimestra most.

KLYTAIMESTRA : I raised my shout of joy a while ago, when the fire first blazed through the night, announcing Troy's fall.

There were of course those who rebuked me saying,

"You've convinced yourself that Troy is sacked because of *a beacon!*

How like a woman!" They called me insane.

Well, I went on with my offerings:

all through the city women raised the women's cry of jubilation in the temples of the gods, throwing spices on the flames. And now, what need for you to tell me more?

From the king himself I shall learn everything—how best to welcome him oh I'm excited—

what day is sweeter for a wife than when she runs to open the door for her husband back from war?—

bring him this message: come with all speed, you darling of the city.

You'll find your loyal wife just as you left her, guarding the house like a good dog, enemy to your enemies, quite unchanged.

She broke no seal while you were away.

And she knows no more of secret sex or scandal than she does of dipping bronze.

This is my boast.

It's one hundred percent true and worthy of a king's wife.

CHORUS : That's how she talks. You may need an interpreter.

But tell me, messenger, what of Menelaos?

Did he come back safe with you?

MESSENGER : Would that I could lie!

CHORUS : Would the truth were happy!

MESSENGER : He vanished from the army, he and his ship too.

CHORUS : You saw him leave Troy? Or did some storm snatch him?

MESSENGER : That's it, you hit the mark.

CHORUS : And they call him alive or dead?

MESSENGER : No one knows.

CHORUS : Describe the storm.

MESSENGER : I don't like to mar a joyful day with unwelcome news.

It's like mixing two different gods.

When a longfaced messenger comes to a city bringing tales of its army fallen, of a wound cut into the flesh of the people, of men from every house thrown onto the bloody prong of Ares, it's appropriate he sings out a hymn to the Furies.

But when he comes bringing victory to a city of joy—how can I mix evil into that?

How tell of the storm that fell on the Argives from angry gods?

For Fire and Water swore an oath—eternal enemies before—to wreck our fleet.

Steep ruinous oceans rose by night, winds lunged out of Thrace and dashed the ships on one another.

The water went wild. Ships simply vanished.

Like sheep lost to a floundering shepherd.

When dawn came we saw the Aigian Sea abloom with bodies and pieces of wreck.

Some devious god kept us and our hull intact, some forgiving god, with a nudge of the tiller.

Salvation took its seat on our boat and we did not go under, nor run up onshore.

No—we swept out of death into sudden bright daylight scarcely trusting our luck, then took account of a new cataclysm—our fleet in shreds.

If any man of them still breathes, of course he thinks us lost, as we do him.

May it turn out well!

As for Menelaos, expect him.

Some ray of light may find that man alive, if Zeus is not yet inclined to wipe out his family, there's hope he'll come home.

That's the truth.

CHORUS : Who can have named her so perfectly?

What prophetic mind?

Who was it gave to that bride of blood, that wife of strife, the name *Helen*? For the woman is hell to ships, hell to men, hell to cities.

She vanished out the veils of her bedroom on a western wind and in her wake came men with shields tracking her all the way to the shore of Troy. They beached in blood.

Trouble came to Troy. It had the name *wedding*, it had the name *funeral*.

It began in dishonoring Zeus, god of the feast where her wedding song was sung.

Wrongfully sung.

Then Troy grew old overnight. Troy changed its tune to one of sorrow. Paris became the bridegroom of doom.

And Helen made misery and death for her people just by living among them.

A man reared a lion cub once in his house.

It was new at the breast, a young gentle thing, tumbling and playing with children, delighting the old. The man took it up in his arms like an infant, nuzzling his hand when its belly was empty.

But time passed. It started to show its lion nature—  
made an uninvited feast of slaughtered sheep, spilling blood and  
havoc from room to room.

That thing was a priest of ruin. Bred in the house. Sent by god.

At first, I think, there came to Troy a spirit of windless calm.  
An ornament—a pretty glance, little sting to the heart.  
But she swerved aside to a marriage of murder and tears.  
She harmed the place, she harmed the people, she was sent by Zeus  
to the city of Priam: bride as disaster. Bride as Fury.  
You know the old saying—Great wealth gives birth to great woe.  
Now here is my own opinion:  
One unholy deed breeds another unholy deed.  
A righteous house has righteous children.

Old *hybris* makes new *hybris*.

In the hour of crisis you cannot resist her, you cannot fight back—  
an utter unholy recklessness will take you and curse you and ruin  
your house.

Like mother, like child.

But Justice shines in shabby houses and honors the virtuous life.  
From gold-drenched halls and unclean hands she turns away—  
toward holiness. Not wealth, not pomp, not praise.  
Justice guides us all.

*[Enter AGAMEMNON, with KASSANDRA behind at a distance.]*

CHORUS : Enter king, sacker of Troy, son of Atreus—how should I  
address you?

How can I show you just the right amount of deference and  
courtesy?

Many people cherish a show of feeling.

They're quite wrong.

You can always find someone to groan along with your misfortune  
(while the sting doesn't reach his heart) or join in your joy (note the  
fake smile).

But no smart shepherd is deceived by a fawning flock or its watery  
love.

Now I have to admit when you sent an army after Helen I wrote you  
off as a loose cannon.

But I also admit, you did it! You won! And you'll learn in time if  
you ask the right questions who kept your city safe for you and who  
did not.

AGAMEMNON : First Argos and the gods of Argos I think it right to greet—those gods who had a share in my return and the justice I took from Priam's town.

They didn't wait for legal arguments but cast their vote straight into the urn of blood.

So much for Troy.

There was an urn of hope but it was empty.

Look, smoke still floats above that city, you can see it.

Storms of ruin there. The ashes stink with wealth.

For this victory we must pay the gods everlasting gratitude.

We threw a noose around Troy's arrogance and—for a woman's sake—

ground the city to powder.

We are the wild beast of Argos, descended from horses, sheathed in shields, that overleapt the towers of Troy, a rawflesheating lion to lap the blood of kings!

That's what I have to say to the gods.

Now you (old men): I hear and I agree with your anxieties.

I see your point.

Few men can praise a friend's success without resentment—there is a poison settles on the heart and makes it twice as painful when a man in distress has to look on another rejoicing.

I know. I am acquainted with the mirror of society—

why, all those men who posed as loyal friends to me?

No more than ghosts or shadows. Odysseus alone turned out to be a steady tracehorse—

alive or dead as he may be.

For all the rest: we'll call an assembly.

Deliberate.

Where things go well, we'll plan how to prolong it.

Where there is need of medicine and healing, we'll cauterize or cut.

Clear out that disease!

So now into my house, my hearth, and greet the gods.

They sent me forth, they bring me back.

May Victory, who came with me, abide and stay.

KLYTAIMESTRA : Gentlemen, citizens, elders of Argos, you, I am not ashamed to tell you of my husbandloving ways.

Shyness diminishes with age.

The fact is, life got hard for me when he was off at Troy.

It's a terrible thing for a woman to sit alone in a house, listening to rumors and tales of disaster one after another arriving—

why, had this man sustained as many wounds as people told me, he'd be fuller of holes than a net!

To die as often as they reported he'd need three bodies and three cloaks of earth—one for each burial.

So often did nasty rumors reach me, I hung up a noose for my neck more than once.

Other people had to cut me down.

That's why our boy—yours and mine—

Orestes, is not standing here, as he should be.

Don't worry. Strophios has him, our Phokian ally, who warned me of problems, your danger beneath Troy but also anarchy at home—the people throwing off your government.

They love to kick a man who's down.

I'm telling the truth. This is not an excuse.

As for me, my torrents of tears have dried away.

Not one drop left.

My poor eyes ache with weeping and watching all the night—

I watched for those beacon fires myself.

No one else kept vigil as I did.

And the lightest buzzing of a gnat would wake me if I fell into a dream.

There I saw you catastrophized in more ways than there were moments of sleep.

So now, with all that over, with my mind grief free, I salute my man: he is the watchdog of the palace, forestay of the ship, pillar of the roof, only son of his father, land appearing to sailors lost at sea, fine weather after storms, fresh stream to a thirsty traveler.

Is it not sweet to escape necessity!

We've had our share of evils!

Envy begone!

And now, dear one, as a special favor to me, I pray you descend from your car without setting foot on the ground—

O King, this foot that wasted Troy!

*[To servants.]*

What are you waiting for? You have your orders—strew the ground with fabrics, now!

Make his path crimsoncovered!

purplepaved! redsaturated!

So Justice may lead him to the home he never hoped to see.

Everything else I'll arrange myself with my usual sleepless vigilance—exactly right, gods willing.

AGAMEMNON : Offspring of Leda, guard of my house, you have made a speech to match my absence—long.

But praise of me should come from others.

Don't pamper me with female ways, don't fuss like some groveling barbarian, don't strew my path with anything at all!

You'll draw down envy.

That stuff is for gods.

I am mortal. I can't trample luxuries underfoot. Honor me as a man not a divinity.

Anyway, who needs red carpets—my fame shouts aloud.

Here discretion is key.

Count no man happy until he dies happy.

If I keep this rule, I'll be okay.

KLYTAIMESTRA : Oh come on, relax your principles.

AGAMEMNON : No I will not. My principles are firm.

KLYTAIMESTRA : Would you have done it for the gods to satisfy a vow?

AGAMEMNON : Yes, if some religious expert prescribed it.

KLYTAIMESTRA : What about Priam, if he'd won the war?

AGAMEMNON : Oh Priam would love to walk on stuff like this.

KLYTAIMESTRA : Still you fear the blame of common men?

AGAMEMNON : The voice of the people does have power.

KLYTAIMESTRA : Unenvied means unenviable, you know.

AGAMEMNON : You're like a bulldog. It's not very feminine.

KLYTAIMESTRA : Yet a winner must acknowledge his victory.

AGAMEMNON : And you insist on this victory?

KLYTAIMESTRA : Yes! I do! Bend to me. Please!

AGAMEMNON : Oh all right. Let someone loose my sandals, good slaves of my feet.





So a man's fortune runs a straight course then strikes a hidden reef.  
Yet if as a precaution we throw overboard a certain measure of  
wealth, our house doesn't sink, our ship sails on and Zeus keeps  
sending up field after field of grain to stave off famine.

But the black blood of a man once it falls to the ground who can call it  
back?

Even the healer who thought he knew how was checked by Zeus.

I am a restrained person.

Otherwise my heart would race past my tongue to pour out  
everything.

Instead I mumble,

I gnaw myself.

I lose hope.

And my mind is burning.

*[Enter KASSANDRA.]*

KLYTAIMESTRA : Get yourself into the house, I'm talking to you,  
Kassandra.

Now that Zeus has enrolled you in our household, made you a  
sharer of our water, take your stand by the altar with the other slaves.

Come on, get down here, don't be proud. They say even Herakles  
once was sold as a slave, ate slave's bread.

And if that is your lot, lucky you—your masters here are solid old  
money.

New money people are rough on servants.

Now you know what to expect.

CHORUS : *[To KASSANDRA.]* Your turn. She's talking to you.

You're not a free person:

you'll obey her of course. Or maybe you won't.

KLYTAIMESTRA : Does she talk only "barbarian"—those weird bird  
sounds?

Does she have a brain?

CHORUS : *[To KASSANDRA.]* Your best option is to go with her.

Do as she says. Go.

KLYTAIMESTRA : I can't waste time like this in the doorway.

Already the animals stand at the hearth ready for slaughter—  
a joy we never hoped to see.

So you get a move on, or you'll miss the whole ceremony.

If you really don't understand a word I'm saying make some sign with your hand.

CHORUS : Of an interpreter she seems, this stranger, to have need.  
For her way of turning is that of a newcaught animal's.

KLYTAIMESTRA : Oh she's mad. Harkens only to her own mad mind.  
Brought from a captured city yet she knows not how to take the bit

—  
she frets her inside mouth away in foam of blood.  
I'll not be insulted further.

*[Exit KLYTAIMESTRA.]*

CHORUS : But I, for I pity you, will not get angry.  
Poor creature, come down from there.  
Here is necessity. Here is a yoke for you to bear.

KASSANDRA : OTOTOI POPOI DA!

Apollo!  
O!pollo!  
Woepollo!  
O!

CHORUS : Why do you mix up Apollo with "woe"?  
This god does not ever near sorrow go.

KASSANDRA : OTOTOI POPOI DA!

Apollo!  
O!pollo!  
Woepollo!  
O!

CHORUS : She calls on the god in an unlucky way.  
This god has no part in anyone's death day.

KASSANDRA : Apollo

Apollo  
god of the ways  
god of my ruin oh  
yes you destroy me oh  
yes it is absolute this time

CHORUS : She looks about to prophesy and tell her side.

The god is stretching a slave's mind wide.

KASSANDRA : Apollo

Apollo  
god of the ways  
god of my ruin where  
have you brought me what  
house have you got me to

CHORUS : The house of Atreus, look and you'll see.  
You can trust me.

KASSANDRA : Godhated so  
then too  
much knowing together self-  
murder man-  
chop blood-  
slop floor

CHORUS : She's keen as a hound tracking a smell.  
She'll find blood, she'll tell.

KASSANDRA : Evidence  
evidence  
here  
they shriek children  
roasted on spits a father-gorged  
live—  
flesh-feast

CHORUS : Of course we've heard of your talents before.  
But we're not in the market for prophets anymore.

KASSANDRA : [*scream*] what  
[*scream*] how  
[*scream*] what in the world  
is this [*scream*] strange  
new [*scream*]  
big as the house  
evil in the house  
who can lift it who can heal it  
help is a world away

CHORUS : Some of this I don't get.

Some of it is old hat.

KASSANDRA : [*scream*] woman  
will you  
wash your man in the bath  
how can I  
soon it will  
there she goes  
hand over hand is  
reaching  
out

CHORUS : Riddles all together with oracles tossed.  
I'm still lost.

KASSANDRA : [*scream*] [*scream*] [*scream*] [*scream*] what is this  
appearing a  
net of hell no  
the wife is the net he's  
married to murder here  
comes insatiable vengeance  
howling the sacrifice  
into  
place

CHORUS : Who is this spirit of vengeance you call to?  
Your words make me falter.  
It races my heart the yellow fear  
as when death is near.

KASSANDRA : [*scream*] [*scream*] look  
there look  
there keep  
the bull from the cow she  
nets him she gores  
him with  
her deadly black  
horn he  
falls he's  
down he bathes in  
death are you listening to  
me

CHORUS : Prophecy usually goes right over my head.

Still it sounds grim what she said.  
Oh what good do prophets ever bring?  
They tinge with terror the simplest thing.

KASSANDRA : [*scream*] [*scream*] evil life evil luck evil I am just this  
sound look the  
cup of my pain is already poured  
out why  
did you bring me  
here was  
it for this  
was it for this  
was it for

CHORUS : You're mad—godstruck godswept godnonsensical and you  
keep making that sound, it's not musical.

Like the nightingale who wails her lost child, you're inexhaustibly  
wild.

Sorrow this, sorrow that, sorrow this, sorrow that.

KASSANDRA : But yes think oh think of the clear nightingale—  
gods put round her a wing a life with no sting but for me waits  
*schismos* of the double-edged sword: *schismos* means  
a cleaving a cutting a splitting a chopping in two

CHORUS : Where does it come from this godawful panic, this rash  
hysterical  
clang of your prophetic voice rushing over the edge?

KASSANDRA : O marriage of Paris so deadly for everyone else  
O river of home my Skamander  
I used to dream by your waters now soon enough back and forth on  
the banks of the river of hell  
I will walk with my song torn open

CHORUS : Why are you suddenly speaking clear as day?  
A newborn child could construe what you say.  
It gives me a bloody pain to hear all the griefs you name.

KASSANDRA : [*scream*] [*scream*] [*scream*] for my ruined city  
[*scream*] for the offerings my father made to save its towers he  
killed animal after animal it did no good we suffered anyway and I  
am soon to hit the ground  
I with my *thermonous thermonous* means hot soul, burning mind,

brain on fire

CHORUS : You're back on track.

Some heavy spirit swoops on you and takes your breath—  
out comes Death.

(Outcomes? I'm not sure where this will end.)

KASSANDRA : Okay. No longer.

No longer now out from veils like some firstblush bride shall my  
oracle glance but as brightness blows the rising sun open it will rush  
my oceans forward onto light—a wave of woes far worse than these.

No more riddles.

Bear me witness:

I know that smell. Evils. Evils long ago.

A chorus of singers broods upon this house, they never leave, their  
tune is bad, they drink cocktails of human blood and party through  
the rooms.

You will not get them out.

They are kin to the Furies and sing of original evil, marriage beds  
that stink of life gone wrong.

Do I miss the mark? Am I a prophet of lies?

Just babbling?

Or do you admit I'm a pretty good shot.

Bear me witness:

I see this place I see its ancient sins.

CHORUS : You amaze me. It's as if you were born here.

KASSANDRA : You can thank Apollo.

CHORUS : He desired you?

KASSANDRA : I was ashamed to speak of it before.

CHORUS : Let's not be overdicate.

KASSANDRA : The fact is we wrestled.

CHORUS : Had sex?

KASSANDRA : I said yes but defaulted.

CHORUS : And you already possessed your gift?

KASSANDRA : My gift. Oh yes. I was the local prophet.

CHORUS : So did Apollo punish you?

KASSANDRA : He made my prophecy never believed.

CHORUS : But we believed y—

KASSANDRA : [*scream*] I lose my screams they find me again!

The dread work of prophecy buckles me down to its BAM BAM BAM

—  
do you see them there those young ones who nest by the door  
like shapes in dreams  
like children murdered  
they hold their own flesh in their own hands  
and the entrails drip where their father tasted deep.  
Yes I can see this and I tell you vengeance is coming—  
a soft lion tumbles in the master's bed awaiting him—  
how little the great general understands that bitch who licked his  
hand at the door of the house and what she plans to do.  
She has the nerve, she is a killer, female against male.  
What should I call her—a kind of snake, a Skylla, a plague, a  
mother who breathes out war against her own loved ones?  
How she shrieked in joy to see that man on her doorstep.  
Yet you know it's all the same to me if anyone believes this or not.  
Who cares? The future is coming.  
Soon enough you'll pity me, you'll say I was a true prophet.

CHORUS : Thyestes feasting on his children's flesh—

I get that one, it makes me cold with fear.

After that you were unclear.

KASSANDRA : I say you will see Agamemnon dead.

CHORUS : Hush, girl.

KASSANDRA : There is no hushing this.

CHORUS : Really? Really? I pray you are wrong!

KASSANDRA : Pray away. *They* are preparing to kill.

CHORUS : They? Who? What man do you mean?



KASSANDRA : You haven't been listening at all have you?

CHORUS : Just tell me what he's planning to do.

KASSANDRA : And yet I speak Greek all too well.

CHORUS : So do the Pythian oracles but no one understands them.

KASSANDRA : [*scream*] Again! The fire comes on me.

[*scream*] For Apollo! [*scream*] For me!

Look there—see the lioness who beds a wolf when the lion is gone?

She'll kill me, she's mixing a cup of anger and death even now, she's  
whetting her sword on her husband's head—

she'll make him pay for bringing me home!

So why do I keep this ridiculous costume, these “prophetic symbols”  
the stick the crown—

be gone! be damned! Enrich someone else's life with doom!

Look, Apollo himself is denuding me—

he watched them mock me in my little prophet's dress, my little  
prophet's hat.

They called me *gypsy beggar starveling*, I put up with that.

And now the prophet forces his prophetess down to the killing floor.

Instead of my father's altar a butcher's block awaits me and a hot  
rip of blood.

I am meat for sacrifice.

But I won't go unavenged.

Another is coming, a son to kill the mother and pay the father's debt

—

strangered from this land he will go into exile then come back one  
day to finish it off.

The gods have sworn an oath on this.

So why call for pity?

I saw Troy fall. I see Troy's victors falling.

Now I go to die. *Hello gates of Hades.*

I pray for an easy death: one clean stroke and then—

I close my eyes.

CHORUS : That was a long speech. But your wisdom does not falter.

On the other hand, if you know you have an appointment with  
death why stride so calmly to the altar?

KASSANDRA : There is no escape.

CHORUS : No, you still have time.

KASSANDRA : The day is come. Flight would be pointless.

CHORUS : Brave girl.

KASSANDRA : People never say that to a lucky person do they?

CHORUS : What about the glamour of a noble death?

KASSANDRA : Alas for my glamorous father and his noble children.

CHORUS : What's the matter? Why do you jump back?

KASSANDRA : *[scream]* *[scream]*

CHORUS : Why do you scream? You seem suddenly disgusted.

KASSANDRA : The house is reeking blood!

CHORUS : Well yes, they're sacrificing animals at the hearth.

KASSANDRA : I know that smell! It isn't animals!

CHORUS : Incense maybe?

KASSANDRA : Here I go. To raise a funeral song for me and Agamemnon.

My life is over.

Oh my friends, I'm not making a fuss like a bird at a bush—  
you can testify to that after I'm dead.

I speak as one about to die:

there will be other deaths in consequence of me, a woman then a  
man.

Remember what I was.

CHORUS : How I pity you and your death foretold.

KASSANDRA : One thing left.

I want to sing my own dirge.

I pray to the sun, to this last minute of life:

let my enemies pay with blood for what they did to me—

I'm just a killed slave, easy fistful of death.

But you,

O humans,

O human things—  
when a man is happy, a shadow could overturn it.  
When life goes wrong, a wet sponge erases the whole picture.  
You,  
you,  
I pity.

*[Exit KASSANDRA.]*

CHORUS : No human ever has enough good fortune.  
No one ever bars it from his door.  
Agamemnon won from gods the right to capture Priam's city.  
If he must shed his blood to pay for others in the past  
and then by dying pass the debt to others in the future,  
who in the world can say that he is safe?

*[Cry from within.]*

AGAMEMNON : *[scream]* I am struck!

CHORUS : Silence! Who cries out?

AGAMEMNON : *[scream]* Again! I am hit a second time!

CHORUS : *[severally]*—Those screams imply the deed is done but let's go slow.

—My advice is summon the townsfolk here.  
—I say burst in and catch them unaware.  
—Something like that, something like that, I agree.  
—It's obvious they're laying the ground for tyranny.  
—And we're wasting time while they defy the goddess named  
Delay.  
—Oh I don't know what to do or what to think or what to say.  
—Me neither. Words can't raise the dead.  
—Do you want those criminals down on your head?  
—Unendurable. Death is better.  
—So from two screams we're saying the king's a dead letter?  
—Well let's not get upset till we clarify this thing.  
—That's my vote. Find out what's going on with our king.

*[Dead bodies of AGAMEMNON and KASSANDRA are displayed on the stage with KLYTAIMESTRA standing over them.]*

KLYTAIMESTRA : I said a lot of things before that sounded nice.

I'm not ashamed to contradict them now.  
How else devise damage for an enemy who passed himself off as a friend?

How else fence up nets high enough to catch him?  
It's a long long time I've been pondering this.  
Crisis of an ancient feud.  
Finally, I say finally!  
I stand where I struck with the deed done!  
I did it. I make no denial.  
So he could neither flee nor save himself  
I threw round him a cloth with no way out—a sort of dragnet—evil wealth of cloth.

I strike him twice.  
Two screams and his limbs go slack.  
He falls. I strike him one more time—three for Zeus the savior of corpses!

And as he sputters out his life in blood he sprays me with black drops like dew gladdening me no less than when the green buds of the corn feel showers from heaven!

That's how things stand, old men of Argos.  
Rejoice if you want to. I am on top of the world!  
And this man has the libation he deserves.  
He filled this house like a mixing bowl to the brim with evils, now he has drunk it down.

CHORUS : Your mouth is amazing.  
Who would boast like this over a husband?

KLYTAIMESTRA : Don't squawk at me. I'm not some witless female.  
I am fearless and you know it.  
Whether you praise or blame me I don't care.  
Here lies Agamemnon, my husband, a dead body, work of my righteous right hand.  
That's how things stand.

CHORUS : What poison did you eat or drink to make you so insane?  
You've cast off, cut off, everything—you will be cityless,  
accursed, an object of hatred, toxic to your own people.

KLYTAIMESTRA : Oh *now* you pull out your code of justice—call *me* accursed, demand *my* exile!  
What about *them*? What about *him*?  
This man who, without a second thought, as if it were a goat dying, sacrificed his own child, my most beloved, my birthpang, my own—

*and he had flocks of animals* to charm the winds of Thrace!

Isn't it this man you should have sent into exile, to pay for that polluted deed?

Instead you pass judgment on me!

Well I warn you, threaten me all you like and yes, if you crush me, you'll be giving the orders.

But if some god ordains the opposite, however late, old men, I'll teach you your place.

CHORUS : You swaggering egotist.

Your mind is mad with killing.

I see a stain of blood upon your eye.

But you know one day when you've lost both friends and honor, you'll have to repay blow for blow.

KLYTAIMESTRA : Listen and keep listening: this I swear to you.

By the Justice of my child, by Ruin, by Revenge—

the three gods for whom I slaughtered him—

hope does not walk the halls of fear in me so long as Aigisthos lights the fire on my hearth.

Aigisthos is loyal. A good defender.

My personal shield.

Here lies the man who despoiled me, darling of every fancy girl at Troy.

And by his side the little prophetess who sweetened his sheets.

Sweetened the whole army's sheets, I shouldn't doubt.

They got what they deserve those two.

Yes here he lies. And she like a swan that has sung its last song beside him, his truelove, his little spiceberry.

You know, to look at them kind of excites me.

CHORUS : How I wish that I could fall asleep and not wake up.

Our guardian is gone, the gracious man who for a woman's sake suffered so much and by a woman's hand is now cut down.

Helen! wild mad Helen, you murdered so many beneath Troy.

Now you've crowned yourself one final perfect time, a crown of blood that will not wash away.

Strife walks with you everywhere you go.

KLYTAIMESTRA : Oh stop whining.

And why get angry at Helen?

As if she singlehandedly destroyed those multitudes of men.

As if she all alone made this wound in us.

CHORUS : I call upon the evil demon who besets this house,  
who besets the sons of Tantalos, you whose power comes from  
women, whose voice is like a crow, you perch upon the corpse  
harshing out your hymn of joy!

KLYTAIMESTRA : Now you're making sense—  
to call upon the thricegorged evil demon of this family.  
Deep in its nerves is a lust to lick blood and no wound heals before the  
next starts oozing.

CHORUS : This demon you admire sits heavy on the house, heavy  
with anger,

a ruinous insatiable thing.

*[scream]* For the sake of Zeus!

Zeus is the cause,

Zeus is the action.

Whatever happens for mortals without Zeus?

What part of all this is not godaccomplished?

O how shall I lament you O my king?

My heart is full of love.

But you lie in this spider's web leaking out your life—  
a death unholy, a bed unworthy, a blade coming out of your own  
wife's hand.

KLYTAIMESTRA : You call this deed mine?

And I his wife? You're wrong!

Some ancient bitter spirit of revenge disguised as Agamemnon's wife  
arose from Atreus' brutal feast to sacrifice this man for those little  
children.

CHORUS : You are guiltless of this murder?

Who is your witness? I don't think so!

Oh yes, some spirit of vengeance may have been your secret sharer.  
Ares is black with wading through blood and he will get justice for the  
clotted gore of children used as food.

O how shall I lament you O my king?

My heart is full of love.

But you lie in this spider's web leaking out your life—  
a death unholy, a bed unworthy, a blade coming out of your own  
wife's hand.

KLYTAIMESTRA : His death was nothing unworthy!

Did he not bring lies and ruin on this house?

My poor little green shoot Iphigeneia—  
she's the one who suffered unworthy.  
He has nothing to complain about.  
He paid by the sword for what he himself began.

CHORUS : I am at a loss. I have no idea where to turn, everything's falling apart.

A storm of blood beats on the roof—no more little drops!  
I'm terrified.  
Justice is sharpening a second sword on a second whetstone.

O earth I wish you had wrapt me away before I saw my king sprawled  
in a bath! Who will bury him? Who will mourn him—you?  
You'd have the nerve to sing his lament as if you were doing him a  
favor?  
Who in the world will shed true tears at this man's tomb?

KLYTAIMESTRA : That's not your concern.

By me he fell, by me he died, I shall bury him.  
Not with wailing from this house.  
No, Iphigeneia will open her arms and run to meet him in Hades—  
a father-daughter embrace, won't that be perfect!

CHORUS : She shoots back taunt for taunt.

How to judge? The thief is robbed, the killer pays his price.  
But here's the key: while Zeus sits on his throne the doer must suffer.  
That is the law. Who could drive the curse out of this family?  
These people are glued to ruin.

KLYTAIMESTRA : Well, that's a good point.

But I for one propose to swear a truce with the demon of this house.  
I'll be content with where we've got to now, hard though it is to bear.  
Let the demon go grind out murders on some other family.  
I'm happy with a tiny share of the wealth here if I can stop us all  
killing one another.

*[Enter AIGISTHOS.]*

AIGISTHOS : O welcome day of justice! Now I can say the gods are  
handling miscreants as they should, when I see this fellow lying in  
robes that the Furies wove—

it's payback for his father's crimes.

I am oh! quite pleased.

For Atreus you know, who was ruler of this land and this man's

father, drove Thyestes, who was my father and this man's brother—  
am I making myself clear?—

out of his city and away from his home.

Then when he (Thyestes) returned as a suppliant to his (Atreus')  
hearth

Atreus set before my dad, with hospitality more zealous than kind, a  
merry meal of his own children's flesh.

The toes and fingers he chopped up especially small.

Thyestes took a chunk and ate it, not knowing.

That meal ruined our family, as you can see.

He suddenly saw what he'd done, shrieked aloud, fell back  
vomiting carnage and called out a curse upon this house, kicking  
over the table to emphasize it:

*May the entire race of Pelops perish this same way!*

So that's why you see this man lying here dead.

I planned it. Righteously.

For he exiled me too, along with my poor father, when I was quite  
young.

Justice brought me back.

From exile I laid my finger on this man, devising every detail of his  
doom.

And you know, even death would be sweet to me now

I've seen him caught in the nets of Justice.

CHORUS : Aigisthos, your roosting repels me.

You say you intended to kill this man, plotted his pitiful murder all  
alone.

And I say you're a candidate for stoning. Know it.

The people will bring you to justice.

AIGISTHOS : Don't squawk at me from your seat on the lowest rowing  
bench:

I run this ship. Know it.

You may be old but you'll learn to control your impulses.

Bondage and hunger are wonderful teachers.

Have you eyes? Don't you see? If you kick against the pricks, you'll  
hurt yourself.

CHORUS : *Woman!* You skulk at home while men are off at war.

You foul the bed of our king and plot his death!

AIGISTHOS : You'll be sorry you said that.

You're the opposite of Orpheus, whose voice could charm.

Your silly yelping infuriates me.



But you will be rendered acquiescent.

CHORUS : As if *you* could ever be my master—you who dreamed of a king's murder but had not the nerve to do the deed yourself!

AIGISTHOS : Well, no. To entrap him was the wife's work, obviously.

An old enemy like me would have been instantly suspicious.

But with his wealth I plan to rule this state and whomever does not obey me

I'll yoke to a heavy collar. Hunger and darkness will break him down.

CHORUS : Given the rot in your soul, why not kill the king yourself?

Instead a woman has polluted our land and our gods.

Does Orestes somewhere look upon the light?

I pray he come back and put you two to death!

AIGISTHOS : If that is your attitude, you'll soon learn—

CHORUS : Come! Men! There's work to do!

AIGISTHOS : [*To his guards.*] Swords up!

CHORUS : Death, you say! We're ready.

AIGISTHOS : Good, you'll soon taste it.

KLYTAIMESTRA : No, no, no, no, my dear darling, no more evil.

The harvest is in: we have enough pain, enough bloodshed.

Venerable elders, go back to your homes, before you suffer.

What we did had to be done.

And if it ends here, we're content.

Some demon of luck has clipped us with a sharp hoof.

That's a woman's opinion, for what it's worth.

AIGISTHOS : You mean these creatures are permitted to pelt me with insults heedlessly, randomly, treating it like a game?

CHORUS : You won't see men of Argos cringe before a coward!

AIGISTHOS : I'll come after you!

CHORUS : Not if the gods bring Orestes back!

AIGISTHOS : Empty hope! The food of exiles!

CHORUS : Go on, be yourself, grow fat, pollute justice, now is your chance!

AIGISTHOS : One day you'll pay.

CHORUS : Brag away! You're like a cock beside his hen.

KLYTAIMESTRA : Ignore their yelpings.

You and I, as masters of this house, will dispose all things as they should be.

Beautifully.

*[Exeunt.]*

# ELEKTRA

by Sophokles

## INTRODUCTION

### HER

Her name sounds like a negative adjective: “alektra” in Greek means “bedless, unwed, unmarriageable.” Her life is a stopped and stranded thing, just a glitch in other people’s plans. Her function and meaning as a human have been reduced to one activity—saying *no* to everything around her. *No* to her father’s murder at the hands of her mother, *no* to her mother’s adultery with Aigisthos, *no* to going on with her life as if nothing were wrong, *no* to breaking off her lament.

People sometimes say of Elektra that her mourning is excessive. She would not disagree. Early in the play she confesses to the chorus:

*Women, I am ashamed before you: I know  
you find me extreme  
in my grief.  
I bear it hard.  
But I tell you I have no choice.  
(338–42)*

She has no choice, because she has no other self than the one that mourns. She is clear about this:

*I cannot not grieve.  
(181)*

Locked between the two negatives of this despairing sentence is the whole range of her options as Elektra. Again her clarity:

*I need one food:  
I must not violate Elektra.  
(494–95)*

What does it mean to “not violate Elektra”? Her sense of self is amazing. Pressure comes from every side, from everyone around her, to acquiesce in the crimes of her mother and keep outrage quiet. Pressure has partly succeeded: she is deformed. Psychologically and morally she has no room to breathe or move. And she knows this. She says to the chorus:

*Evil is a pressure that shapes us to itself.  
(424)*

Later, more bitterly, to her mother:

*I am the shape you made me.  
Filth teaches filth.  
(836–37)*

To “violate Elektra” would be to stop saying *no* to evil and filth. Sophokles is a playwright fascinated in general by people who say *no*, people who resist compromise, people who make stumbling blocks of themselves, like Antigone or Ajax. These characters usually express defiance in some heroic action—Antigone buries her brother, Ajax falls on his sword. Elektra has the same kind of raw, stubborn, scandalous soul, but her circumstances are different: Elektra is deprived of action.

The play begins with two men center stage making a plan that will change her life and deciding not to tell her about it, although she is hovering just inside the door (they hear her weeping). The play ends with two men center stage marching into the house to complete the revenge plot while Elektra is left outside to follow after them or stand and wait, no one seems to care. The play’s centerpiece is a deception scene in which two men manipulate Elektra with lies to a point of near hysteria. She is an adult but unmarried female in the house of a

mother who hates her and she has neither social function nor emotional context. She seems to squat on the doorstep of the house rather than live inside. Her sister calls her a maniac and waves her ideas away. Her brother treats her as superfluous to his plans—he finds her wild, emotional, depressing. She is a woman stranded at doorways and passivity is killing her.

There is only one thing she can do.

Make noise.

So Elektra talks, wails, argues, denounces, sings, chants and screams from one end of the play to the other. She is onstage almost every minute and has one of the longest speaking parts in Greek tragedy. Sounds of every kind emerge from her, articulate and inarticulate. Her power of language is fantastic; she can outtalk anyone in the play. Her vocabulary of screams is so rich that I chose to transliterate her cries letter for letter—OIMOI! instead of the conventional *Alas!* or *Woe is me!* <sup>7</sup> This is not a person who would say *Woe is me!* She is a torrent of self. Actionless, yet she causes things to happen and people to change. Hopeless, yet she keeps Elektra going. There are moments when she transcends herself in words, as in her opening prayer to light and air:

*O holy light!*

*And equal air shaped on the world—*

*(116)*

There are moments that condense her to pure hate, as when she hurls at her mother:

*Call me*

*baseminded, blackmouthing bitch! if you like—*

*for if this is my nature*

*we know how I come by it, don't we?*

*(815–18)*

She is no Antigone—not noble or lovable or “deserving of golden honor,” as Sophokles says of that other lone female. But she is always worth listening to.

PLAY

Overall it is “a play without comfort,” as Fiona Shaw said when she undertook the part of Elektra.<sup>8</sup> In particular she found the deception/recognition scene between Elektra and Orestes “unspeakably impossible to play.” Critics and scholars (and translators) agree, this scene is a hard nut to crack. Why does Orestes decide to trick his sister into thinking he’s dead? Why does he give it up in the middle? What does Sophokles want to achieve here? The alternation of lies and truth, high emotions and low, is bewildering and cruel, the tug-of-war over an empty urn almost bizarre. Fiona Shaw describes it this way:

*To have decided your brother is dead and then to hear he’s alive and then to hear he’s dead again and then to hear he’s alive again scrambles the brain. There cannot be any recovery from it ... It’s like playing a very low note and suddenly playing a very high note and you break the voice on the way. You break everything.*<sup>9</sup>

Despite its difficulty, she says the scene proved exceptionally moving in performance. Audiences wept. Audiences also wept in the fourth century B.C. when the celebrated actor Polos played the part. According to ancient gossip, Polos had only recently lost by death a beloved son when he was invited to do Sophokles’ *Elektra* in a revival of it at Athens. This was his approach:

*Having costumed himself in the mourning garb of Elektra, Polos took from the tomb the ashes and urn of his son, embraced them as if they were those of Orestes and filled the whole place not with the appearance and imitation of sorrow but with genuine grief and unfeigned lamentation. It seemed the play was being acted but this was in fact real heartbreak.*<sup>10</sup>

This story is probably just a story. But it gives me pause, I think because it draws out a strand of uneasiness that is already present in Sophokles’ construction of the scene. I mean his play with fakery. For isn’t it deeply odd that Elektra’s profoundest emotional outpouring, the lament for Orestes during which “you break everything,” as Fiona Shaw says, should be evoked by a fake object—this funeral urn that is

supposed to contain Orestes' ashes but in fact contains nothing? What does "in fact" mean in such a context? The "fact" that Polos is exploiting and the "fact" that Sophokles is staging are facts of different orders, yet they fit one within the other within theatrical experience. Sophokles may have constructed the urn scene to question this fit. I doubt he would have approved Polos using his own son's death to get a strong performance, but he seems (in other plays as well as *Elektra*) very alert to the boundary between art and reality and sometimes inclined to fiddle with it himself.<sup>11</sup>

To look at the matter from another angle: Could the recognition scene have been staged differently? We have a good example. Orestes' story is a standard myth told and retold by poets from Homer to Euripides. But Sophokles' closest model was probably *Choephoroi* (*Libation Bearers*), the second play of Aiskhylos' *Oresteia*, staged in 458 B.C.: here we see a recognition scene between brother and sister that it is straightforwardly joyful—no deception of Elektra, no tormenting her with a fake funeral urn, no ironic byplay. Emotions run easy and true to their goal, vengeance seems justified in the eyes of (at least some of) the gods, and two murderous children are (arguably) redeemed by mutual love. In Sophokles' replay, all this is displaced and estranged. He subtracts redemption and leaves justice vague. Focus is on Elektra—shattered and elated, manipulated and suppressed by turns, her poor soul subject to someone else's script, her responses coerced by their staging. "You have used me strangely," she says to Orestes finally (1754).

We can say for pretty sure that Sophokles was thinking of Aiskhylos when he composed his *Elektra*, because he quotes him. The death scene of Klytaimestra in Sophokles' play echoes the death scene of Agamemnon in Aiskhylos' *Agamemnon*, even down to reiterating the death cries that emerge from the house in each case. Elektra's horrific command to Orestes

*Hit her a second time, if you have the strength!*  
(Sophokles' *Elektra* 1885)

is a direct quotation of her father's pitiful

*Again! I am hit a second time!*  
(Aiskhylos' *Agamemnon* 1014)

It's as if the whole family were there, knee-deep in blood, and Elektra is killing her mother with her father's words. Why would Sophokles do this? To emphasize Elektra's awful command of language as a weapon? To remind us of Klytaimestra's crime and close the cycle of vengeance in this house? To reopen Agamemnon's wounds and suggest that vengeance here will never end? To trump Aiskhylos? To pay homage to Aiskhylos?<sup>12</sup> Perhaps all these at once. Sophokles is a complex poet working in a complex tradition. His audience enjoys all kinds of play with masks. All kinds of uses of urns. They do not come to the theater for comfort.

## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

(in order of appearance)

OLD MAN *servant and former tutor of Orestes*

ORESTES *son of Klytaimestra and Agamemnon*

CHRYSOTHEMIS *daughter of Klytaimestra and Agamemnon*

ELEKTRA *daughter of Klytaimestra and Agamemnon*

KLYTAIMESTRA *queen of Argos*

AIGISTHOS *paramour of Klytaimestra*

CHORUS *of Mykenaian women*

PYLADES *Orestes' silent friend*

SETTING: *Before the palace of Agamemnon in Argos.*

*[Enter the OLD MAN and ORESTES with PYLADES.]*



OLD MAN : You are his son! Your father marshaled the armies at Troy once—child of Agamemnon: look around you now.

Here is the land you were longing to see all that time.

Ancient Argos. You dreamed of this place.

The grove of Io, where the gadfly drove her.

Look, Orestes. There is the marketplace named for Apollo, wolfkiller god.

And on the left, the famous temple of Hera.

But stop! There—do you know what that is?

Mykenai. Yes. Look at it. Walls of gold!

Walls of death. It is the house of Pelops.

I got you out of there out of the midst of your father's murder, one day long ago.

From the hands of your sister

I carried you off. Saved your life. Reared you up—to this: to manhood. To avenge your father's death.

So, Orestes! And you, dear Pylades—

Now is the time to decide what to do.

Already the sun is hot upon us.

Birds are shaking, the world is awake.

Black stars and night have died away.

So before anyone is up and about let's talk.

Now is no time to delay.

This is the edge of action.

ORESTES : I love you, old man.

The signs of goodness shine from your face.

Like a thoroughbred horse—he gets old, but he does not lose heart, he pricks up his ears—so you urge me forward and stand in the front rank yourself. Good. Now, I will outline my plan. You listen sharp. If I'm off target anywhere, set me straight.

You see, I went to Pytho to ask the oracle how I could get justice from the killers of my father.

Apollo answered:

*Take no weapons.*

*No shield.*

*No army.*

*Go alone—a hand in the night.*

*Snare them.*

*Slaughter them.*

*You have the right.*

That is the oracle.

Here is the plan:  
you go into the house at the first chance.  
Find out all that is happening there.  
Find out and report to us. Be very clear.  
You're so old, they won't know you.  
And your garlands will fool them.  
Now this is your story:  
you're a stranger from Phokis, from the house of Phanoteus (he's  
the most powerful ally they have).

Tell them on oath that Orestes is dead.  
An accident. Fatal: rolled out of his chariot on the racetrack at  
Delphi.

Dragged to death under the wheels.  
Let that be the story.  
Meanwhile, we go to my father's grave, as Apollo commanded, to  
pour libation and crown the tomb with locks of hair cut from my  
head.

Then we'll be back with that bronzeplated urn (you know, the one I  
hid in the bushes).

Oh yes, we'll fool them with this tale of me dead,  
burnt, nothing left but ash.  
What good news for them!

As for me—what harm can it do to die in words?  
I save my life and win glory besides!  
Can a mere story be evil? No, of course not—so long as it pays in  
the end.

I know of shrewd men who die a false death so as to come home all  
the more valued.

Yes, I am sure:  
I will stand clear of this lie and break on my enemies like a star.

O land of my fathers! O gods of this place!  
Take me in. Give me luck on this road.  
House of my father:  
I come to cleanse you with justice.  
I come sent by gods.  
Do not exile me from honor!  
Put me in full command of the wealth and the house!  
Enough talk.  
Old man, look to your task.  
We are off.  
This is the point on which everything hinges.  
This is the moment of proof.

ELEKTRA : *[A cry from inside the house.]* IO MOI MOI DYSTENOS.

OLD MAN : What was that? I heard a cry—some servant in the house?

ORESTES : Can it be poor Elektra?  
Should we stay here and listen?

OLD MAN : No. Nothing precedes the work of Apollo.  
That is our first step: your father's libations.  
That is the way to win: action.

*[Exit the OLD MAN and ORESTES with PYLADES. Enter ELEKTRA from the palace.]*

ELEKTRA : O holy light!

And equal air shaped on the world—you hear my songs, you hear  
the blows fall.

You know the blood runs when night sinks away.

All night I watch.

All night I mourn, in this bed that I hate in this house I detest.

How many times can a heart break?

Oh Father, it was not killer Ares who opened his arms in some  
foreign land to welcome you.

But my own mother and her lover Aigisthos:

those two good woodsmen took an axe and split you down like an  
oak.

No pity for these things, there is no pity but mine, oh Father, for the  
pity of your butchering rawblood death.

Never will I leave off lamenting, never. No.

As long as the stars sweep through heaven.

As long as I look on this daylight.

No.

Like the nightingale who lost her child I will stand in his doorway  
and call on his name.

Make them all hear.

Make this house echo.

O Hades!

Persephone!

Hermes of hell!

Furies, I call you!

Who watch when lives are murdered.

Who watch when loves betray.

Come! Help me! Strike back!  
Strike back for my father murdered!  
And send my brother to me.  
Because alone, the whole poised force of my life is nothing against this.

[Enter CHORUS.]

CHORUS : Your mother is evil but oh my child why melt your life away in mourning?

Why let grief eat you alive?

It was long ago she took your father:

her hand came out of unholy dark and cut him down.

I curse the one who did the deed (if this is right to say).

ELEKTRA : You are women of noble instinct and you come to console me in my pain.

I know.

I do understand.

But I will not let go this man or this mourning.

He is my father.

*I cannot not grieve.*

Oh my friends, Friendship is a tension. It makes delicate demands.

I ask this one thing: let me go mad in my own way.

CHORUS : Not from Hades' black and universal lake can you lift him.  
not by groaning, not by prayers.

Yet you run yourself out in a grief with no cure, no time limit, no measure.

It is a knot no one can untie. Why are you so in love with things unbearable?

ELEKTRA : None but a fool or an infant could forget a father gone so far and cold.

No.

Lament is a pattern cut and fitted around my mind—like the bird who calls Itys! Itys! endlessly, bird of grief, angel of Zeus.

O heartdragging Niobe, I count you a god:

buried in rock yet always you weep.

CHORUS : You are not the only one in the world, my child, who has stood in the glare of grief.

Compare yourself:

you go too far.

Look at your sister, Chrysothemis:

she goes on living. So does Iphianassa.

And the boy—his secret years are sorrowful too, but he will be brilliant one day when Mykenai welcomes him home to his father's place, to his own land in the guidance of Zeus—Orestes!

ELEKTRA : Him yes!

I am past exhaustion in waiting for him—no children, no marriage, no light in my heart.

I live in a place of tears.

And he simply forgets.

Forgets what he suffered, forgets what he knew.

Messages reach me, each one belied.

He is passionate—as any lover.

But his passion does not bring him here.

CHORUS : Have courage, my child.

Zeus is still great in heaven, he watches and governs all things.

Leave this anger to Zeus: it burns too high in you.

Don't hate so much.

Nor let memory go.

For time is a god who can simplify all. And as for Orestes on the shore of Krisa where oxen graze—he does not forget you.

Nor is the king of death on the banks of Acheron unaware.

ELEKTRA : But meanwhile most of my life has slid by without hope.

I sink.

I melt.

Father has gone and there is no man left who cares enough to stand up for me. Like some beggar wandered in off the street, I serve as a slave in the halls of my father.

Dressed in these rags, I stand at the table and feast on air.

CHORUS : One rawblood cry on the day he returned, one rawblood cry went through the halls just as the axblade rose and fell.

He was caught by guile,

cut down by lust:

together they bred a thing shaped like a monster—god or mortal no one knows.

ELEKTRA : That day tore out the nerves of my life. That night:

far too silent the feasting, much too sudden the silence.

My father looked up and saw death coming out of their hands.

Those hands took my life hostage.  
Those hands murdered me.  
I pray the great god of Olympus give them pain on pain to pay for this!  
And smother the glow of deeds like these.

CHORUS : Think again, Elektra.

Don't say any more.  
Don't you see what you're doing?  
You make your own pain.  
Why keep wounding yourself?  
With so much evil stored up in that cold dark soul of yours

you breed enemies everywhere you touch.  
But you must not clash with the people in power.

ELEKTRA : By dread things I am compelled. I know that.

I see the trap closing.  
I know what I am.  
But while life is in me I will not stop this violence. No.  
Oh my friends who is there to comfort me?  
Who understands?  
Leave me be, let me go, do not soothe me.  
This is a knot no one can untie.  
There will be no rest, there is no retrieval.  
No number exists for griefs like these.

CHORUS : Yes but I speak from concern—as a mother would: trust me.

Do not breed violence out of violence.

ELEKTRA : All right then, you tell me one thing—at what point does the evil level off in my life?

You say ignore the deed—is that right?  
Who could approve this?  
It defies human instinct!  
Such ethics make no sense to me.  
And how could I nestle myself in a life of ease  
while my father lies out in the cold, outside honor?  
My cries are wings:  
they pierce the cage.

For if a dead man is earth and nothing, if a dead man is void and dead space lying, if a dead man's murderers do not give blood for blood to pay for this, then shame does not exist.

Human reverence is gone.

CHORUS : I came here, child, because I care for your welfare as my own.

But perhaps I am wrong.

Let it be as you say.

ELEKTRA : Women, I am ashamed before you: I know you find me extreme in my grief.

I bear it hard.

But I tell you I have no choice.

It compels. I act because it compels.

Oh forgive me. But how could I—how could a woman of any nobility stand and watch her father's house go bad?

There is something bad here, growing. Day and night I watch it. Growing.

My mother is where it begins.

She and I are at war.

Our relation is hatred.

And I live in this house with my father's own killers:

they rule me. They dole out my life.

What kind of days do you think I have here?

I see my father's throne with Aigisthos on it.

I see my father's robes with Aigisthos in them.

I see my father's hearth with Aigisthos presiding—  
right where he stood when he struck my father down!

And the final outrage:

the killer tucked in my father's bed.

Behold the man who pleasures my mother—should I call that thing  
“mother” that lies at his side?

God! Her nerve astounds me.

She lives with that polluted object, fearing no fury. No, she laughs!

Celebrates that day—the day she took my father with dances and  
song and slaughter of sheep!

A monthly bloodgift to the gods who keep her safe.

I watch all going dark in the rooms of my house.

I weep.

I melt.

I grieve for the strange cruel feast made in my father's name.

But I grieve to myself:

not allowed even to shed the tears I would.

No—that creature who calls herself noble will shriek at me:

“Godcursed! You piece of hatred!

So you've lost your father—is that unique?

No mortal mourns but you?

Damn you.

May the gods of hell damn you to groan perpetually there as you groan perpetually here!"

That's her style—and when she hears someone mention Orestes, then she goes wild, comes screaming at me:

"Have I you to thank for this?

Isn't it your work? Wasn't it you who stole Orestes out of my hands and smuggled him away?

You'll pay for it.

I tell you, you will pay."

Howling bitch. And by her side the brave bridegroom—this lump of bad meat.

With women only he makes his war.

And I wait.

I wait.

I wait for Orestes.

He will come! He will end this.

But my life is dying out.

He is always on the verge of doing something then does nothing.

He has worn out all the hopes I had or could have.

Oh my friends, in times like these, self-control has no meaning.

Rules of reverence do not apply.

Evil is a pressure that shapes us to itself.

CHORUS : Is Aigisthos at home?

ELEKTRA : No. Do you think I'd be standing outdoors?

He is gone to the fields.

CHORUS : That gives me courage to say what I came to say.

ELEKTRA : What is it you want?

CHORUS : I want to know—your brother—do you say he is coming?  
Or has a plan?

ELEKTRA : Yes, he says so. But he says a lot. Does nothing.

CHORUS : A man who does a great deed may hesitate.

ELEKTRA : Oh? I saved his life without hesitating.



CHORUS : Courage. His nature is good, he will not fail his kin.

ELEKTRA : That belief is what keeps me alive.

CHORUS : Quiet now. Here is your sister come from the house,  
Chrysothemis, of the same father and mother as you.

She has offerings in her hands, as if for the dead.

*[Enter CHRYSOTHEMIS carrying garlands and a vessel.]*

CHRYSOTHEMIS : Here you are again at the doorway, sister, telling  
your tale to the world!

When will you learn?

It's pointless. Pure self-indulgence.

Yes, I know how bad things are.

I suffer too—if I had the strength I would show how I hate them.

But now is not the right time.

In rough waters, lower the sail, is my theory.

Why pretend to be doing, unless I can do some real harm?

I wish you would see this.

And yet, it is true, justice is not on my side.

Your choice is the right one. On the other hand, if I want to live a  
free woman, there are masters who must be obeyed.

ELEKTRA : You appall me.

Think of the father who sired you! But you do not.

All your thought is for her.

These sermons you give me are all learned from Mother, not a word  
is your own.

Well it's time for you to make a choice: quit being "sensible" or  
keep your good sense and betray your own kin.

Wasn't it you who just said, "If I had the strength I would show how  
I hate them"!

Yet here I am doing everything possible to avenge our father, and  
do you help? No!

You try to turn me aside.

Isn't this simply cowardice added to evil?

Instruct me—no! Let me tell you:

What do I stand to gain if I cease my lament?

Do I not live? Badly, I know, but I live.

What is more, I am a violation to them.

And so, honor the dead—if any grace exists down there.

Now you hate them, you say.

But this hate is all words.

In fact, you live with the killers. And I tell you, if someone were to give me all the gifts that make your days delicious, I would not bend.  
No.

You can have your rich table and life flowing over the cup.

I need one food: I must not violate Elektra.

As for your status, I couldn't care less.

Nor would you, if you had any self-respect.

You could have been called child of the noblest men!

Your own dead father, your own loved ones, you do betray.

CHORUS : No anger I pray.

There is profit for both if you listen to each other.

CHRYSOthemis : Her talk is no surprise to me, ladies.

I'm used to this.

And I wouldn't have bothered to speak at all, except—for the rumor I heard.

There is very great evil coming this way, something to cut her long laments short.

ELEKTRA : Tell me what is the terrible thing?

If it is worse than my present life, I give up.

CHRYSOthemis : I tell what I know:

they plan, unless you cease from this mourning, to send you where you will not see the sun again.

You'll be singing your songs alive in a room in the ground.

Think about that.

And don't blame me when you suffer.

Too late then.

Now is the time to start being sensible.

ELEKTRA : Ah. That is their intention, is it.

CHRYSOthemis : It is. As soon as Aigisthos comes home.

ELEKTRA : May he come soon, then.

CHRYSOthemis : What are you saying?

ELEKTRA : Let him come, if he has his plan ready.

CHRYSOthemis : What do you mean? Are you losing your mind?

ELEKTRA : I want to escape from you all.

CHRYSOthemis : Not go on living?

ELEKTRA : Living? Oh yes my life is a beautiful thing, is it not.

CHRYSOthemis : Well it could be, if you got some sense.

ELEKTRA : Don't bother telling me to betray those I love.

CHRYSOthemis : I tell you we have masters, we must bend.

ELEKTRA : *You* bend—you go ahead and lick their boots. It's not my way.

CHRYSOthemis : Don't ruin your life in sheer stupidity.

ELEKTRA : I will ruin my life, if need be, avenging our father.

CHRYSOthemis : But our father, I know, forgives us for this.

ELEKTRA : Cowards' talk.

CHRYSOthemis : You won't listen to reason at all, will you?

ELEKTRA : No. My mind is my own.

CHRYSOthemis : Well then I'll be on my way.

ELEKTRA : Where are you going? Whose offerings are those?

CHRYSOthemis : Mother is sending me to Father's tomb, to pour libation.

ELEKTRA : What? To her mortal enemy?

CHRYSOthemis : To her "murder victim," as you like to say.

ELEKTRA : Whose idea was this?

CHRYSOthemis : It came out of a dream in the night, I believe.

ELEKTRA : Gods of my father be with me now!

CHRYSOthemis : You take courage from a nightmare?

ELEKTRA : Tell the dream and I'll answer you.

CHRYSOthemis : There is little to tell.

ELEKTRA : Tell it anyway.

Little words can mean death or life sometimes.

CHRYSOthemis : Well the story is she dreamed of our father and knew him again for he came back into the light.

Then she saw him take hold of his scepter and stick it in the hearth—his own scepter from the old days, that Aigisthos carries now.

And from the scepter sprang a branch in full climbing leaf which cast a shadow over the whole land of Mykenai.

That is as much as I got from one who overheard her telling the dream to the sun.

More I don't know, except fear is her reason for sending me out today.

So I beg you, by the gods of our family, listen to me.

Don't throw your life away on plain stupidity. For if you spurn me now, you'll come begging later when the trouble starts.

ELEKTRA : Oh dear one, no.

You cannot touch this tomb with any of those things you have in your hands.

It breaks the law. It would be unholy to bring that woman's libations to our father: she is the enemy.

No. Pitch them to the winds or down a dark hole.

They shall come nowhere near his resting place.

But when she dies and goes below, she will find them waiting.

Treasure keeps, down there.

God! Her nerve is astounding.

What woman alive would send gifts to garnish her own murder victim?

And do you imagine the dead man would welcome such honors from the hand of the woman who butchered him—think! To clean her blade she wiped it off on his head!

You astonish me—do you really believe such gifts will cancel murder?

Throw them away.

Here, instead cut a lock from your hair and a lock of mine—meager gifts but it is all I have.

Take this to him, the hair and this belt of mine, though it's nothing elaborate.

Kneel down there and pray to him.

Pray he come up from the ground to stand with us against our enemies.

Pray that his son Orestes live to trample his enemies underfoot.

And someday you and I will go in better style than this to crown his tomb.

But I wonder. You know I wonder—suppose he had some part in sending her these cold unlucky dreams.

Well, never mind that.

Sister, do this deed.

Stand up for yourself and for me and for this man we love more than anyone else in the world, this dead man. Your father. My father.

CHORUS : The girl speaks for human reverence. And you, if you have any sense, will do what she says.

CHRYSOthemis : I will do it. It is the right thing, why dispute?

But please, my friends, I need silence from you.

If my mother finds out, the attempt will turn bitter for me, I fear.

*[Exit CHRYSOthemis.]*

CHORUS : Unless I am utterly wrong in my reading of omens unless I am out of my mind Justice is coming with clear signs before her and righteousness in her hands.

She is coming down on us, child, coming now!

There is courage whispering into me when I hear tell of these sweetbreathing dreams.

He does not forget—the one who begot you the king of the Greeks.

She does not forget—the jaw that bit him in two:

ancient and sharpened on both sides to butcher the meat!

Vengeance is coming—her hands like an army her feet as a host.

She will come out of hiding come scorching down on love that is filth and beds that are blood where marriage should never have happened!

Conviction

is strong in me:

visions like these are no innocent sign for killers.

I say no omens exist for mortals to read from the cold faces of dreams or from oracles unless this fragment of death steps into the

daylight.

O horse race of Pelops, once long ago you came in the shape of a wide calamity to this land.

And from the time when Myrtilos pitched and sank in the sea his solid gold life sliced off at the roots—never since that time has this house got itself clear of rawblood butchery.

*[Enter KLYTAIMESTRA.]*

KLYTAIMESTRA : Prowling the streets again, are you?

Of course, with Aigisthos away.

He was always the one who kept you indoors where you couldn't embarrass us.

Now that he's gone you pay no heed to me.

Yet you love to make me the text of your lectures:

What an arrogant bitchminded tyrant I am, a living insult to you and your whole way of being!

But do I in fact insult you? No. I merely return the muck you throw at me.

Father, Father, Father! your perpetual excuse—your father got his death from me. From me! That's right!

I make no denial.

It was Justice who took him, not I alone.

And you should have helped if you had any conscience.

For this father of yours, this one you bewail, this unique Greek, had the heart to sacrifice your own sister to the gods.

And how was that? Did he have some share in the pain of her birth? No—I did it myself!

Tell me:

Why did he cut her throat? What was the reason?

You say for the Argives?

But they had no business to kill what was mine.

To save Menelaos?

Then I deserved recompense, wouldn't you say?

Did not Menelaos have children himself—in fact two of them, who ought to have died before mine in all fairness?

Their mother, let's not forget, was the cause of the whole expedition!

Or was it that Hades conceived some peculiar desire to feast on my children instead?

Or perhaps that murdering thug your father, simply overlooked my children in his tender care for Menelaos'.

Was that not brutal? Was that not perverse?

I say it was.

No doubt you disagree.

But I tell you one thing, that murdered girl would speak for me if she had a voice.

Anyway, the deed is done.

I feel no remorse.

You think me degenerate?

Here's my advice:

perfect yourself before you blame others.

ELEKTRA : At least you can't say I started it this time;  
these ugly remarks are unprovoked.

But I want to get a few things clear  
about the dead man and my sister as well.

If you allow me.

KLYTAIMESTRA : Go ahead, by all means. Begin this way more often  
and we won't need ugly remarks at all, will we?

ELEKTRA : All right then. Yes.

You killed my father, you admit.

What admission could bring more shame?

Never mind if it was legal or not—did you care?

Let's talk facts: there was only one reason you killed him.

You were seduced by that creature you live with.

Ask Artemis, goddess of hunters, why she stopped the winds at  
Aulis.

No, I'll tell you:

my father one day, so I hear, was out in the grove of the goddess.

The sound of his footfall startled a stag out from cover and, when he  
killed it, he let fall a boast.

This angered the daughter of Leto.

She held the Greeks in check until, as payment for the animal, my  
father should offer his own daughter.

Hence, the sacrifice. There was no other way.

He had to free the army, to sail home or toward Troy.

These were the pressures that closed upon him.

He resisted, he hated it—and then he killed her.

Not for Menelaos' sake, no, not at all.

But even if—let's say we grant your claim—he did these things to  
help his brother, was it right he should die for it at your hands?

By what law?  
Watch out: this particular law could recoil upon your own head.  
If we made it a rule to answer killing with killing, you would die first, in all justice.

Open your eyes! The claim is a fake.  
Tell me:  
Why do you live this way? Your life is filth.  
You share your bed with a bloodstained man:  
once he obliged you by killing my father, now you put him to use making children.

Once you had *decent* children from a *decent* father, now you've thrown them out.

Am I supposed to praise that?  
Or will you say  
you do all this to avenge your child?  
The thought is obscene—to bed your enemies and use a daughter as an alibi!

Oh why go on? I can't argue with you.  
You have your one same answer ready:  
*"That's no way to talk to your mother!"*

Strange.  
I don't think of you as mother at all.  
You are some sort of punishment cage locked around my life.  
Evils from you, evils from him are the air I breathe.  
And what of Orestes?—he barely escaped you.  
Poor boy.  
The minutes are grinding him away somewhere.  
You always accuse me of training him up to be an avenger—Oh I would if I could, you're so right!  
Proclaim it to all!  
Call me baseminded, blackmouthing bitch! if you like—for if this is my nature we know how I come by it, don't we?

CHORUS : [*Looking at KLYTAIMESTRA.*]

Look. Anger is breathing out of her.  
Yet she seems not to care about right and wrong.

KLYTAIMESTRA : Right and wrong!  
What use is that in dealing with her?  
Do you hear her insults?  
And this girl is old enough to know better.  
The fact is, she would do *anything*,  
don't you see that?



No shame at all.

ELEKTRA : Ah now there you mistake me.

Shame I do feel.

And I know there is something all wrong about me—  
believe me. Sometimes I shock myself.

But there is a reason: you.

You never let up this one same pressure of hatred on my life:

I am the shape you made me.

Filth teaches filth.

KLYTAIMESTRA : You little animal.

I and my deeds and my words draw far too much comment from  
you.

ELEKTRA : You said it, not I.

For the deeds are your own.

But deeds find words for themselves, don't they?

KLYTAIMESTRA : By Artemis I swear, you will pay for this when  
Aigisthos comes home!

ELEKTRA : See? You're out of control.

Though you gave me permission to say what I want, you don't know  
how to listen.

KLYTAIMESTRA : Silence! If you allow me I will proceed with my  
sacrifice.

You spoke your piece.

ELEKTRA : Please! By all means! Go to it.

Not another word from me.

KLYTAIMESTRA : [*To her attendant.*] You there! Yes you—lift up these  
offerings for me.

I will offer prayers to this our king and loosen the fears that hold  
me now.

Do you hear me, Apollo?

I call you my champion!

But my words are guarded, for I am not among friends.

It wouldn't do to unfold the whole tale with her standing here.

She has a destroying tongue in her and she does love to sow wild  
stories all over town.

So listen, I'll put it this way:

last night was a night of bad dreams and ambiguous visions.

If they bode well for me, Lykian king, bring them to pass.

Otherwise, roll them back on my enemies!

And if there are certain people around plotting to pull me down from the wealth I enjoy, do not allow it.

I want everything to go on as it is, untroubled.

It suits me—this grand palace life in the midst of my loved ones and children—at least the ones who do not bring me hatred and pain.

These are my prayers, Apollo.

Hear them.

Apollo, grant them.

Gracious to all of us as we petition you.

And for the rest, though I keep silent, I credit you with knowing it fully.

You are a god.

It goes without saying, the children of Zeus see all things.

Amen.

*[Enter the OLD MAN.]*

OLD MAN : Ladies, can you tell me for certain if this is the house of Aigisthos the king?

CHORUS : Yes, stranger, it is.

OLD MAN : And am I correct that this is his wife? She has a certain royal look.

CHORUS : Yes. That's who she is.

OLD MAN : Greetings, Queen. I have come with glad tidings for you and Aigisthos, from a friend of yours.

KLYTAIMESTRA : That's welcome news. But tell me who sent you.

OLD MAN : Phanoteus the Phokian. On a mission of some importance.

KLYTAIMESTRA : What mission? Tell me. Insofar as I like Phanoteus, I am likely to like your news.

OLD MAN : Orestes is dead. That is the sum of it.

ELEKTRA : OI 'GO TALAINA. My death begins now.

KLYTAIMESTRA : What are you saying, what are you saying? Don't bother with her.

OLD MAN : Orestes—dead. I say it again.

ELEKTRA : I am at the end. I exist no more.

KLYTAIMESTRA : *[To ELEKTRA.]* Mind your own affairs, girl. But you, stranger—tell me the true story:

How did he die?

OLD MAN : Yes I was sent for this purpose, I'll tell the whole thing.

Well:

he had gone to the spectacle at Delphi, where all Greece turns up for the games.

Things were just beginning to get under way and the herald's voice rang out announcing the footrace—first contest.

When he came onto the track he was radiant. Every eye turned.

Well, he leveled the competition, took first prize and came away famous.

Oh there's so much to tell—I never saw anything like his performance!—but let me come straight to the point.

He won every contest the judges announced—single lap, double lap, pentathlon, you name it.

First prize every time.

He was beginning to take on an aura.

His name rang out over the track again and again:

“Argive Orestes,

whose father commanded the armies of Greece!”

So far so good.

But when a god sends harm, no man can sidestep it, no matter how strong he may be.

Came another day.

Sunrise: the chariot race.

He entered the lists.

What a pack:

there was one from Achaia, a Spartan, two Libyan drivers, and he in the midst on Thessalian horses stood fifth.

Sixth an Aitolian man, driving bays.

Seventh someone from Magnesia.

An Ainian man, riding white horses, had eighth place and ninth a driver from godbuilt Athens.

Then a Boiotian.

Ten cars in all.

As they took their positions, the judges cast lots to line up the cars.

A trumpet blast sounded.

They shot down the track.

All shouting together, reins tossing—

a hard clatter filled the whole course and a vast float of dust as they all streamed together, each one lashing and straining ahead to the next axle box, the next snorting lip, and the horse foam flying back over shoulders and wheels as they pounded past.

Meanwhile Orestes just grazing the post each time with his wheel, was letting his right horse go wide, reining back on the other.

The cars were all upright at this point—

then, all of a sudden the Ainian's colts go out of control and swerve off just as they round the seventh turn.

They crash head-on into the Barkaian team.

Then one car after another comes ramming into the pile and the whole plain of Krisa fills with the smoke of wrecks.

Now the Athenian driver was smart, he saw

what was happening.

Drew offside and waited as the tide of cars went thundering by.

Orestes was driving in last place, lying back on his mares.

He had put his faith in the finish.

But as soon as he sees the Athenian driver alone on the track

he lets out a cry that shivers his horses' ears and goes after him.

Neck and neck they are racing, first one, then the other nosing ahead, easing ahead.

Now our unlucky boy had stood every course so far, sailing right on in his upright car, but at this point he lets the left rein go slack with the horses turning, he doesn't notice, hits the pillar and smashes the axle box in two.

Out he flips over the chariot rail, reins snarled around him and as he falls the horses scatter midcourse.

They see him down. A gasp goes through the crowd:

"Not the boy!"

To go for glory and end like this—pounded against the ground, legs beating the sky—the other drivers could hardly manage to stop his team and cut him loose.

Blood everywhere.

He was unrecognizable. Sickening.

They burned him at once on a pyre and certain Phokians are bringing the mighty body back—just ashes, a little bronze urn—so you

can bury him in his father's ground.

That is my story.

So far as words go, gruesome enough.

But for those who watched it, and we did watch it, the ugliest evil I ever saw.

CHORUS : PHEU PHEU.

The whole ancient race torn off at the roots. Gone.

KLYTAIMESTRA : Zeus! What now? Should I call this good news?

Or a nightmare cut to my own advantage?

There is something grotesque in having my own evils save my life.

OLD MAN : Why are you so disheartened at this news, my lady?

KLYTAIMESTRA : To give birth is terrible, incomprehensible.

No matter how you suffer, you cannot hate a child you've borne.

OLD MAN : My coming was futile then, it seems.

KLYTAIMESTRA : Futile? Oh no. How—if you've come with convincing proof of his death?

He was alive because I gave him life.

But he chose to desert my breasts and my care, to live as an exile, aloof and strange.

After he left here he never saw me.

But he laid against me the death of his father, he made terrible threats.

And I had no shelter in sleep by night or sleep by day:

Time stood like a deathmaster over me, letting the minutes drop.

Now I am free!

Today I shake loose from my fear of her, my fear of him.

And to tell you the truth, she did more damage.

She lived in my house and drank my lifeblood neat!

Now things are different.

She may go on making threats—but so what?

From now on, I pass my days in peace.

ELEKTRA : OIMOI TALAINA.

Now I have grief enough to cry out OIMOI—

Orestes! Poor cold thing.

As you lie in death your own mother insults you.

What a fine sight!

KLYTAIMESTRA : Well you're no fine sight.  
But he looks as fine as can be.

ELEKTRA : Nemesis! Hear her!

KLYTAIMESTRA : Nemesis *has* heard me. And she has answered.

ELEKTRA : Batter away. This is your hour of luck.

KLYTAIMESTRA : And you think you will stop me, you and Orestes?

ELEKTRA : It is we who are stopped. There's no stopping you.

KLYTAIMESTRA : Stranger, you deserve reward if you really have put a stop on her traveling tongue.

OLD MAN : Then I'll be on my way, if all is well.

KLYTAIMESTRA : Certainly not! You've earned better of me and the man who dispatched you.

No, you go inside.

Just leave her out here to go on with her evil litany.

*[Exit KLYTAIMESTRA and the OLD MAN into house.]*

ELEKTRA : Well how did she look to you—shattered by [1090] grief?

Heartbroken mother bewailing her only son?

No—you saw her—she went off laughing!

O TALAIN'EGO.

Orestes beloved, as you die you destroy me.

You have torn away the part of my mind where hope was—

my one hope in you to live, to come back, [1100] to avenge us.

Now where can I go?

Alone I am.

Bereft of you. Bereft of father.

Should I go back into slavery?

Back to those creatures who cut down my father?

What a fine picture.

No.

I will not go back inside that house.

No. At this door I will let myself lie unloved.

I will wither my life.

If it aggravates them, they can kill me.

Yes it will be a grace if I die.

To exist is pain.  
Life is no desire of mine anymore.

CHORUS : Where are you lightnings of Zeus!  
Where are you scorching Sun!  
In these dark pits you leave us dark!

ELEKTRA : E E AIAI.

CHORUS : Child, why do you cry?

ELEKTRA : PHEU.

CHORUS : Don't make that sound.

ELEKTRA : You will break me.

CHORUS : How?

ELEKTRA : If you bring me hope and I know he is dead, you will harm  
my heart.

CHORUS : But think of Amphiaraus:  
he was a king once, snared by a woman in nets of gold.  
Now under the earth

ELEKTRA : E E IO.

CHORUS : he is a king in the shadows of souls.

ELEKTRA : PHEU.

CHORUS : Cry PHEU, yes! For his murderess—

ELEKTRA : was destroyed!

CHORUS : Destroyed.

ELEKTRA : I know—because an avenger arose.  
I have no such person. That person is gone.

CHORUS : You are a woman marked for sorrow.

ELEKTRA : Yes I know sorrow. Know it far too well.

My life is a tunnel choked by the sweepings of dread.

CHORUS : We have watched you grieving.

ELEKTRA : Then do not try—

CHORUS : What?

ELEKTRA : To console me.

The fact is, there are no more hopes.

No fine brothers.

No comfort.

CHORUS : Death exists inside every mortal.

ELEKTRA : Oh yes, but think of the hooves drumming down on him!

See that thing dragging behind in the reins—

CHORUS : Too cruel.

ELEKTRA : Yes. Death made him a stranger—

CHORUS : PAPAI.

ELEKTRA : Laid out somewhere not by my hands.

Not with my tears.

*[Enter CHRYSOTHEMIS.]*

CHRYSOTHEMIS : I am so happy, I ran here to tell you—putting good manners aside!

I have good news for you that spells release from all your grieving.

ELEKTRA : Where could you find anything to touch my grief?

It has no cure.

CHRYSOTHEMIS : Orestes is with us—yes! Know it from me—plain as you see me standing here!

ELEKTRA : You are mad.

You are joking.

CHRYSOTHEMIS : By the hearth of our father, this is no joke.

He is with us. He is.



ELEKTRA : You poor girl.  
Who gave you this story?

CHRYSOthemis : No one gave me the story!  
I saw the evidence with my own eyes.

ELEKTRA : What evidence?  
My poor girl, what has set you on fire?

CHRYSOthemis : Well listen, for gods' sake.  
Find out if I'm crazy or not.

ELEKTRA : All right, tell the tale, if it makes you happy.

CHRYSOthemis : Yes, I will tell all I saw.  
Well.

When I arrived at Father's grave I saw milk dripping down from the top of the mound and the tomb wreathed in flowers—flowers of every kind—what a shock!

I peered all around—in case someone was sneaking up on me but no, the whole place was perfectly still.

I crept near the tomb.

And there it was.

Right there on the edge.

A lock of hair, fresh cut.

As soon as I saw it, a bolt went through me—  
almost as if I saw his face,

I suddenly knew! Orestes.

Beloved Orestes.

I lifted it up. I said not a word.

I was weeping for joy.

And I know it now as I knew it then, this offering had to come from him.

Who else would bother, except you or me?

And I didn't do it. I'm sure of that.

You couldn't do it—god knows you don't take a step from this house without getting in trouble.

And certainly Mother has no such inclinations.

If she did, we would hear of it.

No, I tell you these offerings came from Orestes.

Oh Elektra, lift your heart!

Bad luck can't last forever.

Long have we lived in shadows and shuddering:  
today I think our future is opening out.

ELEKTRA : PHEU!

Poor lunatic. I feel sorry for you.

CHRYSOthemis : What do you mean? Why aren't you happy?

ELEKTRA : You're dreaming, girl, lost in a moving dream.

CHRYSOthemis : Dreaming! How? I saw what I saw!

ELEKTRA : He is dead, my dear one.

He's not going to save you.

Dead, do you hear me? Dead. Forget him.

CHRYSOthemis : OIMOI TALAINA.

Who told you that?

ELEKTRA : Someone who was there when he died.

CHRYSOthemis : And where is this someone? It's all so strange.

ELEKTRA : He's gone in the house. To entertain Mother.

CHRYSOthemis : I don't want to hear this. I don't understand.

Who put those offerings on Father's tomb?

ELEKTRA : I think, most likely, someone who wished to honor Orestes' memory.

CHRYSOthemis : What a fool I am—here I come racing for joy to tell you my news, with no idea how things really are.

The evils multiply.

ELEKTRA : Yes they do. But listen to me.

You could ease our sorrow.

CHRYSOthemis : How? Raise the dead?

ELEKTRA : That's not what I meant. I am not quite insane.

CHRYSOthemis : Then what do you want? Am I capable of it?

ELEKTRA : All you need is the nerve—to do what I say.

CHRYSOthemis : If it benefits us, I will not refuse.

ELEKTRA : But you know nothing succeeds without work.

CHRYSOthemis : I do. I'll give you all the strength I have.

ELEKTRA : Good then, listen. Here is my plan.

You know, I think, our present contingent of allies: zero.

Death took them.

We two are alone.

Up to now, while I heard that my brother was living I cherished a hope that he'd arrive one day to avenge his father.

But Orestes no longer exists. I look to you.

You will not shrink back.

You will stand with your sister and put to death the man who murdered your father:

Aigisthos.

After all, what are you waiting for?

Let's be blunt, girl, what hope is left?

Your losses are mounting, the property gone and marriage seems a fading dream at your age—or do you still console yourself with thoughts of a husband?

Forget it. Aigisthos is not so naive as to see children born from you or from me—unambiguous grief for himself.

But now if you join in my plans, you will win, in the first place, profound and sacred respect from the dead below:

your father, your brother.

And second, people will call you noble.

That is your lineage, that is your future.

And besides, you will find a husband, a good one: men like a woman with character.

Oh don't you see? You'll make us famous!

People will cheer! They'll say "Look at those two!" They'll say "Look at the way they saved their father's house!

Against an enemy standing strong!

Risked their lives! Stood up to murder!

Those two deserve to be honored in public, on every streetcorner and festival in the city—

there should be a prize for heroism like that!"

So they will speak of us.

And whether we live or die doesn't matter:

that fame will stand.

Oh my dear one, listen to me.

Take on your father's work, take up your brother's task, make some refuge from evil for me and for you.

Because you know, there is a kind of excellence in me and you—born in us—and it cannot live in shame.

CHORUS : In times like these, speaking or listening, forethought is your ally.

CHRYSOTHEMIS : Well yes—and if this were a rational woman she would have stopped to think before she spoke.

She is, unfortunately, mad.

Tell me, what in the world do you have in mind as you throw on your armor and call me to your side?

Look at yourself! You are female, not male—born that way.

And you're no match for them in strength or in luck.

They are flush with fortune;

our luck has trickled away.

Really, Elektra, who would think to topple a man of his stature?

Who could ever get away with it?

Be careful: this sort of blundering might make things worse for us—what if someone overhears!

And there is nothing whatever to win or to gain

if we make ourselves famous and die in disgrace.

Death itself is not the worst thing.

Worse is to live when you want to die.

So I beg you, before you destroy us and wipe out the family altogether, control your temper.

As for your words, I will keep them secret—for your sake.

Oh Elektra, get some sense! It is almost too late.

Your strength is nothing. You cannot beat them: give up.

CHORUS : Hear that? Foresight!—

no greater asset a person can have than foresight combined with good sense.

ELEKTRA : Predictable.

I knew you'd say no.

Well:

alone then.

One hand will have to be enough.

One hand *is* enough.

Yes.

CHRYSOthemis : Too bad you weren't so resolved on the day Father died.

You could have finished the task.

ELEKTRA : Yes, I had the guts for it then, but no strategy.

CHRYSOthemis : Forget strategy—you'll live longer.

ELEKTRA : I gather you don't intend to help.

CHRYSOthemis : Too risky for me.

ELEKTRA : You have your own strategy, I see.

I admire that.

But your cowardice appalls me.

CHRYSOthemis : One day you will say I was right.

ELEKTRA : Never.

CHRYSOthemis : The future will judge.

ELEKTRA : Oh go away. You give no help.

CHRYSOthemis : You take no advice.

ELEKTRA : Why not run off and tell all this to Mother?

CHRYSOthemis : I don't hate you that much.

ELEKTRA : At least realize you are driving me into dishonor.

CHRYSOthemis : Dishonor? No: foresight.

ELEKTRA : And I should conform to your version of justice?

CHRYSOthemis : When you are sane, you can think for us both.

ELEKTRA : Terrible to sound so right and be so wrong.

CHRYSOthemis : Well put! You describe yourself to a fault.

ELEKTRA : Do you deny that I speak for justice?

CHRYSOTHEMIS : Let's just say there are times when justice is too big a risk.

ELEKTRA : I will not live by rules like those.

CHRYSOTHEMIS : Go ahead then. You'll find out I was right.

ELEKTRA : I *do* go ahead. You cannot deter me.

CHRYSOTHEMIS : So you won't change your plan?

ELEKTRA : Immorality isn't a plan. It is the enemy.

CHRYSOTHEMIS : You don't hear a single word I say.

ELEKTRA : Oh it was all decided long ago.

CHRYSOTHEMIS : Well I'll be off.

It's clear you could never bring yourself to praise my words, nor I your ways.

ELEKTRA : Yes. You do that. You be off.

But I will not follow you, no.

Never.

Not even if you beg me.

When I look in your eyes I see emptiness.

CHRYSOTHEMIS : If that is your attitude, that is your attitude.

When you're in deep trouble, you'll say I was right.

*[Exit CHRYSOTHEMIS.]*

CHORUS : Why is it—we look at birds in the air, we see it makes sense the way they care for the life of those who sow and sustain them—why is it we don't do the same?

No:

by lightning of Zeus, by Themis of heaven, not long free of pain!

O sound going down to the dead in the ground, take a voice, take my voice, take down pity below to Atreus' dead:

tell them shame.

Tell them there is no dancing.

Because here is a house falling sick falling now between two children battling, and there is no more level of love in the days.

Betrayed, alone she goes down in the waves:

Elektra, grieving for death,

for her father, as a nightingale grieving always.

Nor does she think to fear dying, no!

she is glad to go dark.

As a killer of Furies, as a pureblooded child of the father who sowed her.

No one wellborn is willing to live

with evil, with shame, with a name made nameless.

O child, child, you made your life a wall of tears against dishonor:

you fought and you won.

For they call you the child of his mind,

child of his excellence.

I pray you raise your hand and crush the ones

who now crush you!

For I see you subsisting in mean part, and yet you are one who kept faith with the living laws, kept faith in the clear reverence of Zeus.

*[Enter ORESTES and PYLADES with urn.]*

ORESTES : Tell me ladies, did we get the right directions?

Are we on the right road? Is this the place?

CHORUS : What place? What do you want?

ORESTES : The place where Aigisthos lives.

CHORUS : Well here you are. Your directions were good.

ORESTES : Which one of you, then, will tell those within?

Our arrival will please them.

CHORUS : Her—as nearest of kin, she is the right one to announce you.

ORESTES : Please, my lady, go in and tell them that certain Phokians are asking for Aigisthos.

ELEKTRA : OIMOI TALAIN'. Oh no. Don't say that. Don't say you have come with evidence of the stories we heard.

ORESTES : I don't know what you heard.  
Old Strophios sent me with news of Orestes.

ELEKTRA : Oh stranger, what news? Fear comes walking into me.

ORESTES : We have his remains in a small urn here—for he's dead, as you see.

ELEKTRA : OI 'GO TALAINA. Oh no. No. Not this thing in your hands. No.

ORESTES : If you have tears to shed for Orestes, this urn is all that holds his body now.

ELEKTRA : Oh stranger, allow me, in gods' name—if this vessel does really contain him, to hold it in my hands.

For myself, for the whole generation of us, I have tears to keep, I have ashes to weep.

ORESTES : [*To PYLADES with urn.*] Bring it here, give it to her, whoever she is.

It is no enemy asking this.

She is someone who loved him, or one of his blood.

ELEKTRA : If this were all you were, Orestes, how could your memory fill my memory, how is it your soul fills my soul?

I sent you out, I get you back:

tell me how could the difference be simply nothing?

Look!

You are nothing at all.

Just a crack where the light slipped through.

Oh my child, I thought I could save you.

I thought I could send you beyond.

But there is no beyond.

You might as well have stayed that day to share your father's tomb.

Instead, somewhere, I don't know where—suddenly alone you stopped—where death was.

You stopped.

And I would have waited and washed you and lifted you up from the fire,

like a whitened coal.

Strangers are so careless!

Look how you got smaller, coming back.



OIMOI TALAINA.

All my love gone for nothing.

Days of my love, years of my love.

Into your child's fingers I put the earth and the sky.

No mother did that for you.

No nurse.

No slave.

I. Your sister without letting go, day after day, year after year, and you my own sweet child.

But death was a wind too strong for that.

One day three people vanished.

Father. You. Me. Gone.

Now our enemies rock with laughter.

And she runs mad for joy—that creature in the shape of your mother—how often you said you would come one secret evening and cut her throat!

But our luck canceled that, whatever luck is.

And instead my beloved, luck sent you back to me colder than ashes,

later than shadow.

OIMOI MOI.

Pity, PHEU PHEU oh beloved, OIMOI MOI as you vanish down that road.

Oh my love take me there.

Let me dwell where you are.

I am already nothing.

I am already burning.

Oh my love, I was once part of you—take me too!

Only void is between us.

And I see that the dead feel no pain.

CHORUS : Elektra, be reasonable.

Your father was a mortal human being.

Orestes too—we all pay the same price for that.

Control yourself.

ORESTES : PHEU PHEU.

What should I say? This is impossible! I cannot hold my tongue much longer.

ELEKTRA : What is the matter? What are you trying to say?

ORESTES : Is this the brilliant Elektra?

ELEKTRA : This is Elektra. Brilliant no more.

ORESTES : OIMOI TALAINES.

It hurts me to look at you.

ELEKTRA : Surely, stranger, you're not feeling sorry for me?

ORESTES : It shocks me, the way you look: Do they abuse you?

ELEKTRA : Yes, in fact. But who are you?

ORESTES : PHEU. What an ugly, loveless life for a girl.

ELEKTRA : Why do you stare at me? Why are you so sympathetic?

ORESTES : I had no idea how bad my situation really is.

ELEKTRA : And what makes you realize that? Something I said?

ORESTES : Just to see the outline of your suffering.

ELEKTRA : Yet this is only a fraction of it you see.

ORESTES : What could be worse than this?

ELEKTRA : To live in the same house with killers.

ORESTES : What killers? What evil are you hinting at?

ELEKTRA : My own father's killers.

And I serve them as a slave. By compulsion.

ORESTES : Who compels you?

ELEKTRA : Mother she is called. Mother she is not.

ORESTES : How do you mean? Does she strike you? Insult you?

ELEKTRA : Yes. And worse.

ORESTES : But have you no one to protect you?

No one to stand in her way?

ELEKTRA : No. There was someone. Here are his ashes.

ORESTES : Oh girl. How I pity the dark life you live.

ELEKTRA : No one else has ever pitied me, you know.

ORESTES : No one else has ever been part of your grief.

ELEKTRA : Do you mean you are somehow part of my family?

ORESTES : I'll explain—if these women are trustworthy.

ELEKTRA : Oh yes, you can trust them. Speak freely.

ORESTES : Give back the urn, then, and you will hear everything.

ELEKTRA : No! Don't take this from me, for gods' sake, whoever you are!

ORESTES : Come now, do as I say. It is the right thing.

ELEKTRA : No! In all reverence no please—don't take this away.  
It is all that I love.

ORESTES : I forbid you to keep it.

ELEKTRA : O TALAIN'EGO SETHEN. Orestes! What if they take from me even the rites of your death!

ORESTES : Hush, now. That language is wrong.

ELEKTRA : Wrong to mourn my own dead brother?

ORESTES : Wrong for you to say that word.

ELEKTRA : How did I lose the right to call him brother?

ORESTES : Your rights you have. Your brother you don't.

ELEKTRA : Do I not stand here with Orestes himself in my hands?

ORESTES : No, in fact. That Orestes is a lie.

ELEKTRA : Then where in the world is the poor boy's grave?

ORESTES : Nowhere. The living need no grave.

ELEKTRA : Child, what are you saying?

ORESTES : Nothing but the truth.

ELEKTRA : The man is alive?

ORESTES : As I live and breathe.

ELEKTRA : You—?

ORESTES : Look at this ring—our father's—

ELEKTRA : Father's!

ORESTES :—and see what I mean.

ELEKTRA : Oh love, you break on me like light!

ORESTES : Yes like light!

ELEKTRA : Oh voice, have you come out of nowhere?

ORESTES : Nowhere but where you are.

ELEKTRA : Do I hold you now in my hands?

ORESTES : Now and forever.

ELEKTRA : Ladies, my friends, my people, look! Here stands Orestes:  
dead by device now by device brought back to life!

CHORUS : I see, child. And at this reversal, my tears are falling for joy.

ELEKTRA : IO GONAI.

You exist!

You came back, you found me—

ORESTES : Yes, I am here. Now keep silent awhile.

ELEKTRA : Why?

ORESTES : Silence is better. Someone inside might overhear.

ELEKTRA : By Artemis unbroken! I would not dignify with fear the dull surplus of females who huddle in that house!

ORESTES : Careful! There is war in women too, as you know by experience, I think.

ELEKTRA : OTOTOTOTOI TOTOI.

You drive me back down my desperation—that unclouded incurable never forgotten evil growing inside my life.

ORESTES : I know, but we should talk of those deeds when the moment is right.

ELEKTRA : Every arriving moment of my life has a right to tell those deeds!

And this chance to speak freely is hard-won.

ORESTES : Precisely. Safeguard it.

ELEKTRA : How?

ORESTES : When the time is unsuitable, no long speeches.

ELEKTRA : But how could silence be the right way to greet you—simply coming out of nowhere like a miracle?

ORESTES : It was a miracle set in motion by the gods.

ELEKTRA : Ah.

That is a vast claim and much more beautiful, to think some god has brought you here.

Some god: yes! That must be true.

ORESTES : Elektra, I do not like to curb your rejoicing but I am afraid when you lose control.

ELEKTRA : Oh but my love—now that you have traveled back down all those years to meet my heart, over all this grief of mine, do not oh love—

ORESTES : What are you asking?

ELEKTRA : Do not turn your face from me.  
Don't take yourself away.

ORESTES : Of course not. No one else will take me either.

ELEKTRA : Do you mean that?

ORESTES : Yes I do.

ELEKTRA : Oh beloved, I heard your voice when I had no hope and my heart leapt away from me calling you.

I was in sorrow.

But now I am holding you, now you are visible—light of the face I could never forget.

ORESTES : Spare me these words.

You don't need to teach me my mother is evil or how Aigisthos drains the family wealth, pours it out like water, sows it to the wind.

We've no time for all that—talk is expensive.

What I need now are the practical details:

where we should hide, where we can leap out and push that enemy laughter right back down their throats!

But be careful she doesn't read the fact of our presence straight from the glow on your face.

You must keep on lamenting my fictitious death. Time enough for lyres and laughter when we've won the day.

ELEKTRA : Your will and my will are one: identical, brother.

For I take all my joy from you, none is my own.

Nor could I harm you ever so slightly at any price: it would be a disservice to the god who stands beside us now.

So. You know what comes next.

Aigisthos has gone out, Mother is home.

And don't worry:

she'll see no glow on my face.

Hatred put out the light in me a long time ago.

Besides, since I saw you my tears keep running down—tears, joy, tears all mixed up together.

How could I stop?

I saw you come down that road a dead man, I looked again and saw you alive.

You have used me strangely.

Why—if Father suddenly came back to life I wouldn't call it fantastic.

Believe what you see.

But now you have come, I am yours to command.

Alone, I would have done one of two things: deliver myself or else die.

ORESTES : Quiet! I hear someone coming out.

ELEKTRA : Go inside, strangers. You are bringing a gift they can neither reject nor rejoice in.

*[Enter the OLD MAN.]*

OLD MAN : Idiots! Have you lost your wits completely, and your instinct to survive as well—or were you born brainless?

You're not on the brink of disaster now, you're right in the eye of it, don't you see that?

Why, except for me standing guard at the door here this long while, your plans would have been in the house before yourselves!

Good thing I took caution.

Now cut short the speechmaking, stifle your joy and go into the house. Go!

Delay is disaster in things like this.

Get it over with: that's the point now.

ORESTES : How will I find things inside?

OLD MAN : Perfect. No one will know you.

ORESTES : You reported me dead?

OLD MAN : You are deep in hell, so far as they know.

ORESTES : Are they happy at this?

OLD MAN : I'll tell you that later. For now, the whole plan is unfolding beautifully.

Even the ugly parts.

ELEKTRA : Who is this man, brother?

ORESTES : Don't you know him?

ELEKTRA : Not even remotely.

ORESTES : You don't know the man into whose hands you put me, once long ago?

ELEKTRA : What man? What are you saying?

ORESTES : The man who smuggled me off to Phokis, thanks to your foresight.

ELEKTRA : Him? Can it be? That man was the one trustworthy soul I could find in the house, the day Father died!

ORESTES : That's who he is. Do not question me further.

ELEKTRA : *[To the OLD MAN.]* I bless you like the light of day!

I bless you as the savior of the house of Agamemnon!

How did you come? Is it really you—who pulled us up from the pit that day?

I bless your hands, I bless your feet, I bless the sweet roads you walked!

How strange you were beside me all that time and gave no sign.

Strange—to destroy me with lies when you had such sweet truth to tell.

Bless you, Father!—Yes, Father.

That is who I see when I look at you now.

There is no man on earth I have hated and loved like you on the one same day.

OLD MAN : Enough, now. As for all the stories in between—there will be nights and days to unravel them, Elektra.

But for you two, standing here, I have just one word: act!

Now is the moment!

Now Klytaimestra is alone.

Now there is not one man in the house.

If you wait you will have to fight others, more skilled and more numerous. Think!

ORESTES : Well, Pylades, no more speeches.

As quick as we can into the house—after we pay our respects to the gods of this doorway.

*[Exit ORESTES and PYLADES followed by the OLD MAN.]*



ELEKTRA : King Apollo! Graciously hear them.

Hear me too! I have been devout, I have come to you often, bringing you gifts of whatever I had.

Now again I come with all that I have:

Apollo wolfkiller! I beg you!

I call out—I fall to my knees!

please send your mind over us, inform our strategies, show how the gods reward unholy action!

CHORUS : Look where he comes grazing forward, blood bubbling over his lips: Ares!

As a horizontal scream into the house go the hunters of evil, the raw and deadly dogs.

Not long now:

the blazing dream of my head is crawling out.

Here he comes like a stealing shadow, like a footprint of death into the rooms, stalking the past

with freshcut blood in his hands.

It is Hermes who guides him down a blindfold of shadow—straight to the finish line: not long now!

ELEKTRA : My ladies! The men are about to accomplish the deed—be silent and wait.

CHORUS : How? What are they doing?

ELEKTRA : She is dressing the urn. They are standing beside her.

CHORUS : But why did you come running out here?

ELEKTRA : To watch that Aigisthos doesn't surprise us.

KLYTAIMESTRA : [*within*] AIAI IO.

Rooms filled with murder!

ELEKTRA : Someone inside screams—do you hear?

CHORUS : Yes I hear. It makes my skin crawl.

KLYTAIMESTRA : OIMOI TALAIN'.

Aigisthos, where are you?

ELEKTRA : There! Again! Someone calls out.

KLYTAIMESTRA : Oh child my child, pity the mother who bore you!

ELEKTRA : Yet you had little enough pity for him and none for his father!

CHORUS : Alas for the city.

Alas for a whole race thrown and shattered: the shape that followed you down the days is dying now, dying away.

KLYTAIMESTRA : OMOI.

I am hit!

ELEKTRA : Hit her a second time, if you have the strength!

KLYTAIMESTRA : OMOI MAL' AUTHIS. Again!

ELEKTRA : If only Aigisthos could share this!

CHORUS : The curses are working.

Under the ground dead men are alive with their black lips moving, black mouths sucking on the soles of killers' feet.

Here they come, hands soaked with red: Ares is happy!

Enough said.

ELEKTRA : Orestes, how does it go?

ORESTES : Good, so far—at least so far as Apollo's oracle was good.

ELEKTRA : Is the creature dead?

ORESTES : Your good mother will not insult you anymore.

CHORUS : Stop! I see Aigisthos coming, yes, it is him.

ELEKTRA : Boys, get back!

ORESTES : Where do you see him—

ELEKTRA : There—marching right down on us full of joy.

CHORUS : Go quick to the place just inside the front door.

You have won the first round. Now for the second.

ORESTES : Don't worry. We will finish this.

ELEKTRA : Hurry. Go to it.

ORESTES : Yes I am gone.

ELEKTRA : And leave this part to me.

CHORUS : Why not drop a few friendly words in his ear—so his moment of justice may come as a surprise.

*[Enter AIGISTHOS.]*

AIGISTHOS : Does anyone know where those Phokian strangers are? People say they have news of Orestes dead in a chariot crash.

You!

yes you!—you've never been shy to speak your mind.

And obviously this matter most concerns you.

ELEKTRA : Yes of course I know, for I do keep track of the fortunes of the family.

AIGISTHOS : Where are they then, the strangers?—tell me.

ELEKTRA : Inside the house, for they've fallen upon the perfect hostess.

AIGISTHOS : And it's true they bring a report of his death?

ELEKTRA : No—better: they have evidence, not just words.

AIGISTHOS : We can see proof?

ELEKTRA : You can, indeed, though it's no pretty sight.

AIGISTHOS : Well this is good news. Unusual, coming from you.

ELEKTRA : Relish it while you can.

AIGISTHOS : Silence! I say throw open the gates! for every Mykenaian and Argive to see—in case you had placed empty hopes in this man—take my bit on your tongue or learn the hard way.

ELEKTRA : As for me, I am playing my part to the end.

I've learned to side with the winners.

*[A shrouded corpse is disclosed with ORESTES and PYLADES standing beside it.]*

AIGISTHOS : O Zeus! I see here a man fallen by the jealousy of god — but if that remark offends, I unsay it.

Uncover the eyes. Uncover it all.

I should pay my respects.

ORESTES : Uncover it yourself.

This isn't my corpse—it's yours.

Yours to look at, yours to eulogize.

AIGISTHOS : Yes good point. I have to agree.

You there—Klytaimestra must be about in the house—call her for me.

ORESTES : She is right here before you. No need to look elsewhere.

AIGISTHOS : OIMOI.

What do I see!

ORESTES : You don't know the face?

AIGISTHOS : Caught! But *who set the trap?*

ORESTES : Don't you realize yet that you're talking to dead men alive?

AIGISTHOS : OIMOI.

I do understand. You are Orestes.

ORESTES : At last.

AIGISTHOS : I'm a dead man. No way out.

But let me just say—

ELEKTRA : No!

Don't let him speak—by the gods! Brother—no speechmaking now!

When a human being is so steeped in evil as this one what is gained by delaying his death?

Kill him at once.

Throw his corpse out for scavengers to get.  
Nothing less than this can cut the knot of evils inside me.

ORESTES : Get in with you, quickly.  
This is no word game:  
your life is at stake.

AIGISTHOS : Why take me inside?  
If the deed is honorable, what need of darkness?  
You aren't ready to kill?

ORESTES : Don't give me instructions, just get yourself in:  
You will die on the spot where you slaughtered my father.

AIGISTHOS : Must these rooms see the whole evil of Pelops' race,  
present and future?

ORESTES : They will see yours, I can prophesy.

AIGISTHOS : That is no skill you got from your father!

ORESTES : Your answers are quick, your progress slow. Go.

AIGISTHOS : You lead the way.

ORESTES : No you go first.

AIGISTHOS : Afraid I'll escape?

ORESTES : You shall not die on your own terms.  
I will make it bitter for you.  
And let such judgment fall on any who wish to break the law:  
kill them!  
The sum of evil will be less.

*[Exit ORESTES and AIGISTHOS, followed by ELEKTRA, into the house.]*

CHORUS : O seed of Atreus:  
you suffered and broke free,  
you took aim and struck;  
you have won your way through to the finish line.

*[Exit CHORUS.]*

# ORESTES

by Euripides

## INTRODUCTION

*The wounded cry as the clown  
Doubles his meaning ...*

—W. H. AUDEN

When we first meet Orestes in *Orestes*, he is asleep onstage. This sets up a relationship between us and him that will continue through the play. To see Orestes flounder about in decisions and actions as the story proceeds is like watching someone twitch in his sleep and let out the occasional scream. He is present but opaque to us—driven by a dream of his own life that is nightmarishly clear to him on the inside but which he never communicates to us. We see flashes of his reasoning lit up by this or that crisis but we get no sense of the plan of his mind. His moral reactions are often bizarre, as when Tyndareus, grandfather of Orestes and father of Klytaimnestra, denounces him for having murdered his mother. Orestes' response is:

*As a matter of fact, isn't it all your fault for engendering  
her?  
You ruined me!  
(447–48)*

All in all, Orestes is a peculiar customer—not exactly insane but strange and unknowable. His consciousness is entirely his own. And in this respect he is a typical Euripidean creation. Euripides introduced to the Greek tragic stage a concern for the solitary, inward self, for consciousness as a private content that might or might not match up

with the outside appearance of a person, that might or might not make sense to an observer. He lived at a time when philosophers as well as artists were becoming intrigued by this difference between outside and inside, appearance and reality, and were advancing various theories about what truth is and where truth lies. As a tragic poet, Euripides had to confront a special version of the problem. Within a traditional poetic form like Greek tragedy, the truth has only one definition: it is identical with myth. The truth about Orestes was contained in the standard myth of his adventures. Euripides could rearrange its details but he was not at liberty to stage a play in which Orestes refrained from killing his mother. That would have been seen as absurd and untrue. Nor could Euripides present a play that did not have three speaking actors, a chorus of average citizens and a divine epiphany at the end. These were the parts of a legitimate tragedy. Yet we sense in all of Euripides' playwriting a mind out of patience with this straitjacket of fixed truths and predictable procedures. He has revolutionary instincts. He wants to shatter and shock. He goes about it subversively. Leaving the external structure of the myth and the traditional form of the play intact, he allows everything inside to go a tiny bit awry. It creates a mad tension between content and form that builds to a point of explosion in the final scene.

So, for example, he uses the chorus, as was conventional, to comment on the action but he has them say incoherent or contradictory things from one choral ode to the next. He employs the standard device of a messenger speech to convey offstage events yet he employs it not once but twice and the second messenger is a sort of hysterical Trojan version of Venus Xtravaganza—a eunuch slave who speaks entirely in lyric verse (in the original production he would have sung his lines, probably soprano, to the accompaniment of a flute). Euripides throws in the eunuch for shock value and to make the end of the play more exasperating. He seems to prefer maximum exasperation in the final scene, where all the lines of the plot have been pushed to impasse and categories like good/evil, happy/unhappy, mortal/ immortal are sliding around so crazily that only a god can make things clear.

So he brings on a god to make things clear, the *deus ex machina* being a conventional way of tying off the ends of a Greek tragedy. But here too form and content are at odds. For the god in question (it is Apollo) dictates a series of solutions that make nonsense of all the actions and anguish of the characters up to that point. For example, he instructs Orestes, who happens to be holding his sword to the throat of a young girl named Hermione, to lower his weapon and marry her. Orestes merrily agrees to do so.

How should we read moments like this, where exasperation verges

on farce? Sometimes I wonder if Euripides saw the very texture of reality as ironic. Saw the gods as ironic. Saw the gods in their interactions with human beings as essentially *playing*. A frightening idea. But at least it entails the assumption that Euripides himself was *not* playing. That he was a serious playwright who knew his target and took aim.

Another serious way to read a play like *Orestes* is as an indictment of the age and the society in which the playwright lived. His was a time of constant warfare, imperialist greed and astonishing political corruption, rather like our own. Euripides produced *Orestes* in 408 B.C. Later the same year, he left Athens and went to Macedonia, where he died in less than two years. There is no historical evidence to explain why a highly successful playwright would go into voluntary exile at the age of seventy-three. But it makes *Orestes* his last statement to the Athenians—and a wild, heartless, unconstruable statement it is. If I take it as a story of real people, I can find no character to *like* in the play. On the other hand, as an allegory or abstract design, it lacks all exactitude—seems to unfold like a bolt of cloth falling down stairs, spilling itself, random. Yet again, isn't there something terrible in randomness—the idea that at the very bottom of its calculations, real depravity has no master plan of any kind, it's just a dreamy whim that slides out of people when they are trapped or bored or too lazy to analyze their own mania.

There is another way to read Euripides, which is to forget seriousness and see him as just having a good time in the theater, creating sensation and spectacle, throwing the pieces up in the air and letting them fall. To judge from some sentences in *Poetics*, this was Aristotle's view. Still, Aristotle insists that whatever the ineptitudes of his stagecraft, Euripides is TRAGIKOTATOS, "the most tragic" of the Greek poets. A clown, but a dark clown. A child, but terrific. At the start of this introduction I quoted two lines of W. H. Auden that (although he is talking about Shakespeare) seem to capture exactly how it feels to read or watch Euripides' *Orestes*. Here is the whole stanza:

*The aged catch their breath,  
For the nonchalant couple go  
Waltzing across the tightrope  
As if there were no death*

*Or hope of falling down;  
The wounded cry as the clown  
Doubles his meaning, and O*



*How the dear little children laugh  
When the drums roll and the lovely  
Lady is sawn in half.*<sup>13</sup>

## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

(in order of appearance)

ELEKTRA *daughter of Klytaimestra and Agamemnon*

HELEN *wife of Menelaos*

CHORUS *of women of Argos*

ORESTES *son of Klytaimestra and Agamemnon*

MENELAOS *brother of Agamemnon, husband of Helen*

TYNDAREUS *father of Klytaimestra and Helen*

PYLADES *Orestes' friend, silent no more*

MESSENGER

HERMIONE *daughter of Helen*

TROJAN SLAVE *eunuch of Helen's entourage*

APOLLO *god of light and law*

SETTING: *The action is set in Argos. Orestes lies on a bed in front of the house of Atreus, where he has recently murdered his mother, Klytaimestra, to avenge her murder of his father, Agamemnon. Elektra sits beside him.*

ELEKTRA : *Whatever dooms there are men die, whatever harms there*

are men have—Godsent: they blast, we bend.

Take Tantalos. It's a known fact he was born of Zeus—*lucky there* (pardon my sarcasm)—now he lives crouched in fear.

They hung up a boulder over his head.

Payback. It's a known fact, when the gods asked him to dinner he shot off his mouth.

So Tantalos begot Pelops, Pelops begot Atreus—you know all this don't you? the strife, the crimes,

Atreus slicing Pelops' children into soup—and Atreus (I'm skipping some details) begot

Agamemnon (a.k.a. the Glorious) as well as Menelaos, who married loathsome Helen.

Then Agamemnon found himself a wife (Klytaimestra) and here we are: their offspring—three girls one boy.

Orestes, Chrysothemis, Iphigeneia, Elektra (me).

As for our father, well, Klytaimestra disposed of him.

Trapped him in a rug and slit his throat.

Motive?

I'm an innocent girl. Let's leave her motives blank.

But it seemed to Orestes and me there ought to be a law against a mother like that.

Turns out there is: Apollo.

Apollo had us kill her.

Orestes did it, I helped. Kudos were not universal.

Anyway, since then Orestes fell sick.

Here he lies like something melting away.

His mother's blood comes quaking howling brassing bawling blacking down his mad little veins.

Yes gods are on his case now—those ghastly flashing goddesses I hesitate to name:

repeat after me, *Eumenides*!

Six days since our mother was slain and put in the purging fire.

Six days without food or bathing, Orestes huddles in his blankets.

There's the odd sane moment he sits and weeps, then jumps out of bed to race up and down like a wild pony.

But the city of Argos declares us banned from hearth and fire and conversation, us matricides.

This day they will vote to stone us or not.

We have a hope:

Menelaos arrives today from Troy with his ships.

He sent Helen ahead, and he sent her by night, lest people see her walking in daylight—people whose sons died at Troy—and go at her with stones.

She's in the house bemoaning her troubles.

Her one comfort now is her daughter Hermione, sent here by Menelaos when he sailed to Troy to be raised in our house.

This girl is Helen's joy, her way of forgetting.

So I'm watching down the road for Menelaos.

If he doesn't save us we're done for.

An unlucky house is an impotent thing. Known fact.

*[Enter HELEN from the house.]*

HELEN : O child of Klytaimestra and Agamemnon, Elektra so long unwed,

you wretched girl, how are you?—you and your poor Orestes who's turned out to be a mother killer, hasn't he?

Yet talking to you does not pollute me.

I ascribe your crime to Apollo.

Still, I bewail Klytaimestra's death. My sister.

For I sailed off to Troy, crazed by a god as you know, and never saw her again.

I am bereaved. I do lament.

ELEKTRA : Helen, why should I say what you see with your own eyes?

We're a mess.

I sit without sleep keeping watch on a corpse—to judge from his breathing he's all but dead—while you, miraculously happy wife of a miraculously happy husband, well, let's say you've got us on a bad day.

HELEN : How long is he lying like this?

ELEKTRA : Since the murder.

HELEN : I pity the boy. I pity the mother.

ELEKTRA : Yes well, so it goes. He's broken down.

HELEN : Listen dear, will you do me a favor?

ELEKTRA : I'm more or less occupied at the moment.

HELEN : Go to my sister's grave for me—

ELEKTRA : To my mother's grave? Why in the world?

HELEN :—and bring her offerings? Grave offerings?

ELEKTRA : Isn't that your responsibility?

HELEN : But you know, I'm ashamed to show myself to the public eye.

ELEKTRA : Bit late for those scruples. You left the house brazenly enough once upon a time.

HELEN : True but unkind.

ELEKTRA : And what sort of shame is it you feel?

HELEN : The fathers of those who lie dead at Troy, them I have reason to fear.

ELEKTRA : No kidding.

HELEN : So you'll do it?

ELEKTRA : I could not even look at my mother's grave.

HELEN : But it gives such a bad impression for a servant to go.

ELEKTRA : Send Hermione.

HELEN : Oh quite unseemly. She's just a girl.

ELEKTRA : Think of it as compensation. My mother gave her a home after all.

HELEN : Good point. I'll send Hermione. Thanks.

Hermione! Come out here, child!

*[Enter HERMIONE.]*

HELEN : Take these offerings to Klytaimestra's tomb—there's honey mixed with milk and a dash of wine, some hair from my head.

Go stand at the grave and pour them and say:

"Your sister Helen sends these gifts.

She cannot approach your tomb herself, for fear of the Argive mob."

Urge her to think kindly on me, on you, on my husband—and these two poor souls ruined by god.

Promise her whatever people give the dead I'll give.

Now go. Be quick. Mind the way home.

*[Exit HELEN into the house, HERMIONE by side entrance.]*

ELEKTRA : Helen! What a masterpiece!

How is it some people manage to come out on top every time?

Did you see how she'd trimmed just the very tips of her hair, not to spoil its beauty? Same old Helen.

May the gods hate you! You wrecked me, you wrecked a whole generation of Greeks!

Ah, here come my friends to share my sorrows.

They might wake Orestes—how I dread to see him stirred into panic again!

Dear ladies, go softly, don't make any sound.

Your kindness is welcome but once he wakes up it's agony.

CHORUS : Silently, silently, lighten the foot, hush the sound.

ELEKTRA : Steer clear of the bed, go this way round.

CHORUS : This way round.

ELEKTRA : Sh, sh, make your voice as a breath through a reed.

CHORUS : Softly indeed.

ELEKTRA : So softly proceed.

Now why have you come?

It's a long while Orestes is lying undone.

CHORUS : How is he doing, if you can say?

ELEKTRA : He is breathing still but he groans all day.

CHORUS : Poor creature!

ELEKTRA : Don't waken the sleeper!

CHORUS : Poor victim of acts sent by god!

ELEKTRA : Wrong were the acts, wrong was the god!

But if you murder your mother, what are the odds?

CHORUS : Look he is moving!

ELEKTRA : Can't you stop shouting?

CHORUS : No, he's still at rest.

ELEKTRA : Go home now, it's best.

CHORUS : He sleeps on unaware.

ELEKTRA : Still let us take care.

O Lady Night!

you who give sleep to mortals when they are broken by toil come from the dark, come on your wings, for we are a substance beginning to spoil.

Agamemnon's house is in despair.

Ah!—the sound—stay back from his bed,

stay away from his poor sleeping head!

Dear friends, I pray, beware!

CHORUS : Where does the end of his suffering lie?

ELEKTRA : Of course he'll die.

As he takes no food, I see no other.

CHORUS : Clearly, no other.

ELEKTRA : Apollo made us sacrificial victims in his murder exchange of father for mother.

CHORUS : Justice, on the one hand.

ELEKTRA : Evil, on the other.

Mother, as you killed so you die.

But you've ruined us all.

You at least went off to be among the dead.

I live on here as corpse beside Orestes' bed.

Nights and tears and groaning, nothing else is mine.

No marriage, no house, no children, just time.

CHORUS : Elektra, here, your brother's coming round. But I don't like the look of him.

ORESTES : O beautiful motions of sleep how sweetly you came to me,  
O Lady Oblivion how kindly you clear away pain.

Where am I? How did I get here? I've no idea. My mind is gone.

ELEKTRA : Dear one. Bless your sleep.  
Shall I touch you, help you?

ORESTES : Yes, oh yes. Wipe the foam from my mouth and my eyes.

ELEKTRA : To serve you is sweet. I am your sister.

ORESTES : Support my side. Move the hair off my face, I can barely see.

ELEKTRA : Your poor unwashed hair, it's gone all wild.

ORESTES : Lay me back down. When the madness leaves I'm limp as a girl.

ELEKTRA : There you go, down on your sickbed again.

ORESTES : Set me back upright, swivel me round—there's no pleasing the sick!

I hate being helpless.

ELEKTRA : Do you want to try putting your feet on the ground? It's been so long.

But change is sweet.

ORESTES : Yes by all means. That will seem like good health.  
And seeming is better than nothing.

ELEKTRA : Listen, dear brother, now while the Furies are letting you think straight.

ORESTES : You have some news? I hope it's good. I have enough trouble.

ELEKTRA : Menelaos is here, he and his ships.

ORESTES : Come to save us? He certainly does owe a debt to our father.

ELEKTRA : Bringing Helen home from Troy.

ORESTES : Better if he'd come back alone. That woman is trouble.

ELEKTRA : All the women of that family are trouble.

ORESTES : Well, make up your mind to be different. You can, you know.

ELEKTRA : What's wrong with your eyes? You're slipping away again!

ORESTES : O Mother I beg you—don't send the snakes! Don't send the bloodyfaced women down on me!—ah they are here!

ELEKTRA : Stay quiet, poor mad one, there's nothing there.

ORESTES : Apollo! Here they come like killer dogs, goddesses hot with the glow of hell!

ELEKTRA : I'll hold on to you, I'll keep you still. You're going into convulsions.

ORESTES : Let me be! You Fury! You're one of them! You grip my waist to hurl me into hell!

ELEKTRA : Misery! Who can help? We're fighting the supernatural!

ORESTES : Give me the bow, Apollo's gift.

He said to use it when these creatures come to ravage my mind.

I'll shoot them down, gods or not.

Hear those arrows whiz through the air? Ah! Ah!

What are you waiting for, bloodsucking women, go! Away!

Apollo's to blame, not me!

Oh.

Oh what.

Oh what am I doing. What am I doing raving like this.

I cannot breathe!

Where am I? How did I get out of bed?

Now again I see calm water, the storm sinks away.

Sister, why do you weep and hide your head?

You make me ashamed! I am an impossible burden, aren't I.

Poor girl, don't melt yourself for my sake.

It's true you gave your approval but the deed was mine, the mother blood is mine. I blame Apollo.

He put me up to it. Now where is he?

And I wonder what my father would say if he were here.

Would he have tried to stop me killing her?



I think he would, I fear he would.

Uncover your head, dear one, stay your tears.

No doubt we are in a bad situation.

But if you give me comfort when I get hopeless I'll do the same for you.

Now go into the house, take sleep, take food and wash yourself.

If you fall sick too we're truly lost.

All we have is us.

ELEKTRA : All we have is impossible.

To live or die with you—it comes to the same thing for me anyway.

Without you what am I? Brotherless fatherless friendless.

All the same, I'll do what you say—but you lie down and stay quiet. Don't let the panic in.

Even imaginary demons can drive you to despair.

*[Exit ELEKTRA into the house.]*

CHORUS : AIAI!

O racing raging goddesses!

You dance a dance that is no dance screaming down the sky in search of justice, bowling down the sky in search of blood!

Eumenides! I pray you off, I pray you out! Let Agamemnon's son forget the lunacy that drives him terribly about!

Alas for the deeds you did, boy, alas for the ruin you meet—all because Apollo barked out an oracle from his legendary Delphic seat!

O Zeus, what pity, what ordeal comes drumming the poor boy down so tears on tears combine for him and some avenger channels his mother's blood into the house to drive him wild? I cry down grief, I cry down grief!

Good fortune does not last for men.

Some god flips up the sail and blasts the boat against a ruin reef.

Still we celebrate the house of godborn

Tantalos—what else could possibly make sense to us?

*[Enter MENELAOS from a side entrance.]*

MENELAOS : O house! How glad I am to look on you—now I'm back from Troy—at the same time I grieve. No hearth more wrapped in wretchedness than this.

I learned of Agamemnon's death when I was coasting Malea.

Out of the waves the prophet Glaukos spoke to me (he is a god who does not lie).

“Menelaos,” he said, “your brother lies dead.  
He’s had his last bath at the hands of his wife.”

We wept, my sailors and I.

Then I put in at Nauplia and sent my wife ahead, thinking to come  
and embrace Orestes and his mother.

I assumed they were well. Then a sailor told me of Klytaimestra’s  
unholy end.

Now tell me, where is he—Agamemnon’s child who had it in him to  
do this dread thing?

He was a babe in her arms when I left for Troy.

I might not recognize him now.

ORESTES : Here is Orestes. I’m the one you want.

I’ll tell you all about my sufferings. Gladly.

But first, your knees I clasp as suppliant. I pray to you.

Save me! You’ve arrived in the nick of time.

MENELAOS : Gods! What do I see? Which of the dead is this?

ORESTES : Well said. I might as well be dead.

MENELAOS : You look like a wild animal. You poor man.

ORESTES : It’s my deeds not my looks that shame me.

MENELAOS : Your eyes are terrible.

ORESTES : Forget the body. I still have my name.

MENELAOS : I really hadn’t expected to find you in this condition.

ORESTES : Mother murderer. Yes that’s me.

MENELAOS : So I hear. Don’t dwell on it.

ORESTES : Some evil spirit is dwelling on me.

MENELAOS : What’s wrong with you? What sickness wastes you  
away?

ORESTES : Conscience. I know what I’ve done.

MENELAOS : How do you mean?

ORESTES : Grief is killing me.

MENELAOS : She is a dread goddess. But curable.

ORESTES : And fits of madness. Mother madness. Mother blood.

MENELAOS : When did that start?

ORESTES : The day I built her tomb.

MENELAOS : Was it at home or near the pyre?

ORESTES : At night as I waited to take up the bones.

MENELAOS : Who else was there?

ORESTES : Pylades, my accomplice in murder.

MENELAOS : What sort of visions plague you?

ORESTES : Three females who look like Night.

MENELAOS : I know who you mean. I don't want to name them.

ORESTES : You're right, they have power.

MENELAOS : And they are the ones dancing you on to madness?

ORESTES : Oh dance me they do.

MENELAOS : Yet it's not surprising, given your crime.

ORESTES : But I have one escape.

MENELAOS : Don't say death, that would be stupid.

ORESTES : No, I mean Apollo, who assigned me to kill my mother.

MENELAOS : A somewhat inept divinity.

ORESTES : We are slaves to the gods. Whatever gods are.

MENELAOS : Yet Apollo does not help you?

ORESTES : He bides his time. That is gods' way.

MENELAOS : How long dead is your mother?

ORESTES : This is the sixth day. Her pyre still warm.

MENELAOS : So *some* gods are quick—the mother avengers.

ORESTES : Inept or not, Apollo will come through for me.

MENELAOS : And how do you stand with the town?

ORESTES : So despised no one will talk to me.

MENELAOS : Have you not purified your hands of blood in the conventional way?

ORESTES : No, I am shut out of houses wherever I go.

MENELAOS : Are there certain men trying to drive you out of the town?

ORESTES : Oiax—he hates my father because of some incident at Troy.

MENELAOS : Ah yes, the death of Palamedes.

ORESTES : In which I had no part.

MENELAOS : Who else is against you? Aigisthos? His people?

ORESTES : Yes they abuse me. And they run the town.

MENELAOS : You're not allowed to hold Agamemnon's scepter?

ORESTES : I'm not allowed to live!

MENELAOS : Give me details.

ORESTES : Today they will vote.

MENELAOS : Vote on what? Your exile?

ORESTES : Death by stoning.

MENELAOS : Why haven't you fled?

ORESTES : I am surrounded.

MENELAOS : By whom?

ORESTES : Long story short, the whole citizen body.

MENELAOS : Oh you poor man. Complete catastrophe.

ORESTES : To you my hopes run. You are my escape. You've come at a time when your fortunes are high and ours are not. Help us. We are your kin.

You owe our father, you know that.

Don't be one of those friends in name only.

CHORUS : Here comes Tyndareus, old and struggling. He's dressed in black, in mourning for his daughter.

*[Enter TYNDAREUS.]*

ORESTES : I'm lost, Menelaos. Here comes Tyndareus. Before him I am utterly ashamed.

Why, he used to carry me in his arms when I was a baby—he and his wife, they treasured me. I've repaid them badly.

What darkness can I find to hide me from his eyes?

TYNDAREUS : Where is he, where is Menelaos? My daughter's husband.

I was pouring libation on Klytaimestra's grave when I heard he'd arrived with his wife.

Safe after so many years! Take me to him. I want to shake his right hand.

MENELAOS : Joy to you, old man.

TYNDAREUS : And to you, my son-in-law—EA!—here is the mother killer snaking about in front of the house!

Look at him, look how he drips unhealth—shudder object!

MENELAOS : He is the son of my beloved brother.

TYNDAREUS : You mean to say he is anything like his father?

MENELAOS : He is. But very, very unfortunate. And I have obligations toward him.

TYNDAREUS : Your time in the East has barbarized you.

MENELAOS : It was always Greek to respect one's kin.

TYNDAREUS : And also to respect the laws.

MENELAOS : But not to make oneself a slave of necessity.

TYNDAREUS : Well, that's your doctrine. I reject it.

MENELAOS : You've got testy in old age. You used to be smarter.

TYNDAREUS : What does *smart* have to do with this? You call him *smart*?

A man who doesn't know the difference between right and wrong?  
Who ignores justice and flouts Greek law?

When Agamemnon breathed his last, struck down by my daughter—oh I agree, a despicable deed—what Orestes ought to have done, what was right and proper, was throw her out of the house.

Proper, righteous, within the law.

But as things are now, he's taken on board the same devils as she.

He was right to think her evil but this murder makes him more to blame.

Listen, I have one question for you, Menelaos.

Suppose one day Orestes' wife should kill Orestes and then Orestes' son murder his mother in revenge.

And then *his* son pay off that murder with another one—where will it end?

Our forefathers thought all this through.

When a man got blood on his hands they had him banished. Not murdered.

Otherwise blood pollution goes on hand to hand forever.

Now me I despise impure women—in the first place my daughter who slew her husband (and this Helen of yours I won't even mention!

You launched a thousand ships for *that*?) but the law I'll defend as far as I can.

All this killing, it's like animals.

How can civilization survive?

I mean [*to ORESTES*] what did you feel, you shameless creature,

when your mother bared her breast and begged you for pity?

I weep to think of it.

At any rate it's obvious the gods hate you—you're paying off your mother's blood in bouts of lunacy.

Who needs more evidence?

So my point is, Menelaos, don't go against the gods, don't choose to help this one.

Let the townspeople stone him to death.

My daughter paid her price by dying.

Yet it was not right she die by *this* hand.

I'm a fortunate man in other ways but not in daughters.

There I struck out.

CHORUS : Lucky the man who gets good children. What a lottery.

ORESTES : I'm afraid to say anything to you, old man. Whatever I say will offend you and your great age makes me hesitate.

Well, here goes.

I am unholy. A mother killer.

At the same time pious and lawful. A father avenger.

It's a contradiction. What should I have done?

My father begot me, your daughter bore me, as the farmland takes the seed: no father, no child.

He is my origin. That was my reasoning.

And as for your daughter—the word *mother* shames me—you know she had something going on the side. Repulsive to say this.

Aigisthos was her secret househusband.

I killed him and made sacrifice of her.

Unholy yes. But I gave justice to my father.

As for your wish to see me stoned, listen, I am a benefactor of Greece!

Picture this: wanton women throughout the land murdering husbands, running to sons for refuge, hunting pity with bared breasts—they'd be killing their men at the slightest pretext.

I put a stop to this. You call me unjust?

My hatred of her was in every way just.

She betrayed the commander in chief of the Greek army—defiled his bed when he was off fighting for the homeland.

She knew she'd done wrong and slew my father lest he punish her.

Should I have kept silent? How would the dead man like that?

Wouldn't *his* Furies be dancing their dance around me now?

Or does my mother have a monopoly on ghastly goddesses?

As a matter of fact, isn't it all your fault for engendering her?

You ruined me!

Through her I lost my father and became a matricide.  
Look, Telemachos didn't have to kill his mother—why?  
Because she wasn't piling husband on top of husband.  
Odysseus' marriage bed is still pure.  
Anyway, the orders I followed were Apollo's.  
Call *him* unholy! Put *him* to death!  
Again I ask you, what should I have done!  
Can't I call upon the god to clear this charge?  
If not, where else can I run?  
No don't say my deed was evil.  
Unlucky, sad, disastrous, yes. Not evil.

CHORUS : Women always complicate things don't they.

TYNDAREUS : You're out of control.

You pain my mind, you make me burn!

I only came to tend my daughter's tomb, now here's an extra task—  
I'll go to the Argive assembly and shake them out against you and  
your sister.

By stoning *you will pay*.

That girl deserves it more than you—'twas she who savaged you  
against your mother, sending endless hostile tales and adverse dreams  
of Aigisthos and adultery may the gods of hell curse that bitter bed—it  
was Elektra set the house ablaze, not using fire.

Menelaos, I have this to say to you:

mark my hatred.

Do not help this man.

He is an enemy of gods, let him be stoned.

Here is my warning: stay out of Sparta and don't take on criminals  
as friends.

Now [*to servant*] get me out of here.

[*Exit TYNDAREUS.*]

ORESTES : Good, go! I prefer talking to this man without you  
interrupting.

Menelaos, why are you pacing in circles, what are your thoughts?

MENELAOS : Give me a minute, I'm pondering.

Which way to turn. Not sure, not sure.

ORESTES : Well, don't make a snap judgment.

Hear me out.



MENELAOS : Okay, I will.

There are times when silence is better than speech, times when speech is better than silence.

ORESTES : And a long speech best of all.

Here goes.

I'm not asking you for a free gift, Menelaos, but to pay what you owe. What you got from my father.

I don't mean money (although life is my most precious asset)—no, I am a criminal.

To balance that, I need a crime from you.

Just as my father undertook to do wrong—to make war on Troy—not for his own sake but to put right the offense of your wife, so you must give back a wrong for a wrong.

And he gave his body too, as friends do, stood by your side in battle, so you could recover your wife.

Pay this back in kind.

Stand by me for one day—I'm not asking ten years!

Now, he had to slaughter his daughter at Aulis as well, but I let that go, you don't have to murder Hermione.

The fact is, you've got the upper hand here, not me.

So grant me my life, for my father's sake.

If I die I leave his house bereft.

You'll say "Impossible!" but that's just it.

Impossible situations are where we need friends.

If I had god on my side I'd be self-sufficient!

All Greeks think of you as a man who loves his wife (I don't say this to be flattering)—in her name beseech you—I'm desperate!

On behalf of my house and the blood you share with my father, imagine him listening to this—imagine his soul hovering near, imagine him saying all that I say!

Okay, there you have it. I've made my claim.

I want survival. Who doesn't!

CHORUS : I'm only a woman but I beg you too, help those in need. You have the power.

MENELAOS : Let me be perfectly clear, Orestes, I do respect you and want to share your pain, that's what family is for—fighting enemies to the death.

So long as god gives the means.

I repeat, so long as god gives the means.

My own force is slight—I've been on the road for years—army disbanded, friends gone.

In open war we would not prevail against Argos.  
What about negotiations? There's an area of hope.  
Stupid to think it will be easy—  
once the mob catches fire you can't just stamp it out—  
but with caution, diplomacy, just the right timing, we might see this storm blow itself away.

Then you walk in and ask for whatever you want.

A mob lives on passion but also *compassion*. Wait for the moment.  
Timing is key.

So. I'll go try to persuade Tyndareus and his Argives to use their zeal wisely.

You know, when the sail is too tight the ship goes under:  
slack off a bit and it justifies itself.

God hates a fanatic. So do good citizens.

Anyway, whatever you think, I can't save you by main strength, it will have to be cunning.

I'm just one lone spear.

Now granted, Argos is an unlikely place to try diplomacy.

But tactically speaking, what is our option?

*[Exit MENELAOS.]*

ORESTES : You worm! What good are you? You'll make war for a woman

but not your own kin? You'll turn your back on me  
now that Agamemnon's cause is finished?

Father, we are friendless after all!

Betrayed! No hope!

This man was my exit strategy.

Oh but look, here comes Pylades, my dearest friend, a sight as sweet  
as calm water to sailors.

*[Enter PYLADES.]*

PYLADES : I raced through the town as soon as I heard of the citizen assembly.

I saw it too.

They mean to kill you and your sister.

What's going on? How are you faring—dearest, sweetest, best of friends—you know you are all these to me.

ORESTES : Our cause is lost. I'll tell you briefly.

PYLADES : Then I'm lost too. Friends share such things.

ORESTES : Menelaos is no good.

PYLADES : Not surprising. Look at his wife.

ORESTES : No use to me at all.

PYLADES : He's actually here?

ORESTES : Yes, he's finally back. But he's just no help.

PYLADES : And has he shipped home his profligate wife?

ORESTES : Oh I think *she* runs the ship.

PYLADES : Where is she, that weapon of mass destruction?

ORESTES : In my house—if you can call it mine.

PYLADES : What did you ask of Menelaos?

ORESTES : To save me from stoning, me and my sister.

PYLADES : God! what did he say?

ORESTES : He got very cautious, as bad friends do.

PYLADES : On what pretext?

ORESTES : Well, Tyndareus came along.

PYLADES : In a rage about his daughter?

ORESTES : You got it. Menelaos took his side.

PYLADES : Scared to shoulder your burden?

ORESTES : Never was much of a warrior. Except with women.

PYLADES : It looks bad for you.

ORESTES : The citizens are casting a vote.

PYLADES : Vote?

ORESTES : Life or death.

PYLADES : Let's get out of here!

ORESTES : We're surrounded—guards on every road.

PYLADES : Yes, I noticed the streets are blocked with weapons.

ORESTES : Our house is beset like a town under siege.

PYLADES : Now ask me my story. The fact is, I'm ruined too.

ORESTES : How?

PYLADES : My father drove me out of the house.

ORESTES : On what charge?

PYLADES : That I joined in your mother's murder and am unholy.

ORESTES : O poor man! My troubles are really your troubles, it seems.

PYLADES : But I'm no Menelaos. I can bear this.

ORESTES : You don't fear the Argives?

PYLADES : The Argives are not my people.

ORESTES : A mob is a terrible thing when its leaders are corrupt.

PYLADES : But if the leaders are honest, decent deliberations can occur.

ORESTES : What do you say we make a joint plan?

PYLADES : Starting how?

ORESTES : Starting with me going to the Argive assembly to tell them

—

PYLADES : that your actions were just—

ORESTES : in avenging my father—

PYLADES : and although they are eager to seize you—

ORESTES : I won't cower in silence and die—

PYLADES : that would be craven!

ORESTES : So what should I do?

PYLADES : Any chance of staying safe here?

ORESTES : No, none.

PYLADES : And if you flee?

ORESTES : Maybe, with luck.

PYLADES : Well, that's better than staying.

ORESTES : So I should go?

PYLADES : At least your death won't be dishonorable.

ORESTES : Right. I'll avoid looking like a coward—

PYLADES : more than if you stay.

ORESTES : Besides, my cause is just.

PYLADES : Pray that they see this.

ORESTES : And people might pity me—

PYLADES : after all, you are of noble blood!

ORESTES : And indignant at my father's death.

PYLADES : Obviously.

ORESTES : I must go. Unmanly to die here.

PYLADES : I agree.

ORESTES : Should I tell my sister?

PYLADES : No, for god's sake!

ORESTES : There would certainly be tears.

PYLADES : A very bad omen.

ORESTES : Surely silence is better.

PYLADES : And you'll save time.

ORESTES : One last worry—

PYLADES : What?

ORESTES : The ghastly goddesses—they'll send my wits astray.

PYLADES : I'll take care of you.

ORESTES : It's rotten work.

PYLADES : Not to me. Not if it's you.

ORESTES : Beware the contagion of madness.

PYLADES : Come now.

ORESTES : You won't shrink back?

PYLADES : A friend does not shrink back.

ORESTES : Then let's go.

PYLADES : Let's go.

ORESTES : Take me to my father's tomb.

PYLADES : Why?

ORESTES : So I can pray for him to save us.

PYLADES : Yes, that would be proper.

ORESTES : My mother's tomb—I will not look at.

PYLADES : No, she was your enemy.

Okay let's hurry, in case the Argives are voting.

Lean on me.

I'll bring you through town, through the crowd, I see no shame in it.

How else would I act, I am your friend!

ORESTES : There's an old saying—a good friend is worth ten thousand relatives.

CHORUS : Huge wealth, huge virtue, huge Greek pride  
has turned away from happiness  
for the house of Atreus  
because in ancient days  
from ancient ways  
came strife and hideous feasting,  
slaughter of children,  
blood for blood  
endlessly being paid back.

Atrocity disguised as good—to cut the flesh of kin and show a  
blacksoaked sword to the sun.  
Evil that calls itself virtue  
is the paranoia  
of men whose minds have broken down.  
Klytaimestra screamed out  
“Child, your act is unholy!  
Don't make yourself infamous  
just to gratify your father!”

What disease, what tears, what pity is worse  
than mother blood on your own hands.  
You did the deed  
and panic struck—  
the ghastly goddesses are hunting you!  
They spin your eyes, they turn you inside  
out!  
You wretch,  
your mother bared her breast, you sank your  
sword in it!

Payback for the father.

*[Enter ELEKTRA from the house.]*

ELEKTRA : Ladies, has poor Orestes run from the house in a frenzy?

CHORUS : Not at all. He's gone to address the Argive assembly.

ELEKTRA : Oh no! Whose idea was this?

CHORUS : Pylades'. But look, here's a messenger to tell us what happened.

*[Enter MESSENGER from a side entrance.]*

MESSENGER : O poor child, poor child of Agamemnon,  
lady Elektra,  
hear my sorry news.

ELEKTRA : We are lost!

MESSENGER : The Argives voted death for you and your brother.

ELEKTRA : OIMOI! I knew this would happen.

But tell me how it went, what did they say?

Do we die by sword or stoning?

MESSENGER : Well, I came in from the country for news of you and Orestes

(I'm a poor man, you know, but your father always gave me handouts) and I saw a crowd gathering.

"What's going on?" I asked someone.

"Look over there," he said, "Orestes has shown up for trial."

I looked and saw an apparition approaching—Pylades and your brother, the one dropping and fainting with disease, the other lifting him along like a little brother.

So the assembly filled up, the question was put:

Who wishes to speak on whether Orestes should die as a matricide?

Then rose up Talthybios, your father's old comrade.

But you know he's a pawn of the ruling regime, so he talked double, glorifying your father, not quite praising your brother, interlacing fine words with foul, alluding to laws and parents and precedent, all the while giving a glad eye to the bosses at the back of the room.

That's what that breed is like: heralds always side with power.

Next spoke Diomedes. He was for exile, not death, on moral grounds.

Some shouted assent, others objected.

Then rose up a man with no door on his mouth—



a big talker—guy with a talent for abuse (and we know who hired him).

He said to kill you and Orestes by stoning.

Tyndareus seconded.

Then another stood up and spoke on the opposite side.

A manly man, decent, a farmer but intelligent.

He tried to come to grips with the arguments.

Said we should crown Orestes for avenging his father  
and putting a godless woman to death.

She was a threat to our whole way of life, he said.

How could we go off to war with wives like that at home, defiling  
the master's bed!

Respectable people found this fellow convincing.

No one else spoke. Your brother came forward.

Argives, he said, no less than my father was I fighting for you when  
I killed her.

If murder of husbands is granted to women who'll escape death?  
Should we be their slaves?

It's all upside down! *She* was the criminal!

If you put me to death, where are our laws?

Anarchy's next!

Well, he didn't persuade the majority,  
though some of us thought he made sense.

That other scoundrel won the day.

The vote was for death.

Orestes just barely persuaded the crowd to give up the stoning idea.

Said he would die by his own hand, this day, with you.

Pylades is bringing him here now, they're both in tears, you'll see.  
Bitter spectacle.

So get your sword ready.

Or rope, however you wish to die.

Your noble birth has been no help to you—not to say Apollo on his  
famous oracle seat!

CHORUS : I begin the lament.

I scratch my cheek  
to bloody detriment,

I beat my head  
and the sound echoes down to hell.

Let all the land cry out  
and shave its head for grief.

Pity comes forward  
for those who will die.

There are no more heroes in Greece!

Ruined and gone  
is the whole house of Pelops.  
Blessedness has flown.  
Envy came down from gods  
and a bloody vote from citizens.  
O you human beings made of tears,  
look how your fate goes astray from your hopes.  
Grief upon grief,  
the life of mortals is a line no ruler can draw.

ELEKTRA : I want to fly!

To the middle of the sky  
where (they say) is a rock that swings on a  
golden chain—  
I will cry aloud  
to ancient Tantalos  
who fathered generations of ruin,  
generations of pure pain.  
You know of the horses that ran mad and  
crashed in the sea.  
You know the prodigies, curses, strife from  
which we have never been free.  
Death breeding death out of death is the  
law of our house.  
It all comes down on me.

CHORUS : Here comes Orestes, a man sentenced to death  
and trusty Pylades, as good as a brother, guiding him along.

*[Enter ORESTES and PYLADES.]*

ELEKTRA : Oh sorrow! I groan to see you standing, brother,  
at the very gates of death.  
I may be looking on you for the last time!  
I may be losing my mind!

ORESTES : Quiet now. No female shrieking.  
It is a sad business, but still.

ELEKTRA : Quiet! How should I be quiet!  
This may be the final daylight you and I will ever see!

ORESTES : Don't drag me down.  
I'm already down! Let it be!

ELEKTRA : I feel such pity for you, for your boyhood, for your poor young life cut off at the roots.

ORESTES : For gods' sake don't unman me.  
I forbid you to bring me to tears.

ELEKTRA : We're about to die. I cannot not groan.  
To love life is a pitiful thing but all mortals do.

ORESTES : This day is ordained for us.  
We must use either rope or sword.

ELEKTRA : *You* kill me, Orestes. Don't let some Argive stranger insult Agamemnon's child.

ORESTES : No, mother blood is enough for me, I can't kill you.  
It must be your own hand. In your own way.

ELEKTRA : So be it. Sword, then.  
But I need to put my arms around your neck.

ORESTES : Take your pleasure. If it is pleasure.

ELEKTRA : O most beloved! We share one soul!

ORESTES : You will melt me. I want to embrace you  
too—oh why not?  
Beloved sister of mine!  
This takes the place of marriage and children for both of us, doesn't it.

ELEKTRA : PHEU! I wish we could die by the same sword  
and lie in the same tomb.

ORESTES : That would be sweet. But we're short of friends to arrange this.

ELEKTRA : So Menelaos did not speak up to save your life, that perfidious coward?

ORESTES : Didn't show his face. He's a man with an eye on the throne.  
Now come, let's make a death worthy of Agamemnon.

I'll show this city I'm noble—I'll stab right through my liver.  
And you, Elektra, match me in courage.  
Pylades, be our referee.  
Lay us out after death  
and bury us in our father's tomb.  
Farewell. I go to it.

PYLADES : Hold on, hold on, I have to protest.  
Do you think I would choose to live without you?

ORESTES : Oh but you can't die too!

PYLADES : Why not?

ORESTES : You didn't kill your mother.

PYLADES : I shared the deed.

ORESTES : No, don't do it! You have a city, a house, a father, a fortune—

I've none of these.  
It's true you can't marry my sister as I once promised  
but you'll find someone else. Have children, a life.  
Our connection is ended. Beloved comrade, farewell.  
She and I are finished, but you—may you fare and be well.

PYLADES : Oh you're way off target. I would never desert you—  
may the ground not accept my blood when I die,  
nor the bright air my soul, if I am lying.  
No, I joined in the murder, I do not plead innocence,  
I plotted it by your side.  
So I join you in death—you, me and this girl  
I did agree to marry her after all.  
And what would I have to say for myself in later life  
if I stopped being your friend the minute you got into trouble?  
No.  
We're going to die together, so let's confer:  
How can we make sure Menelaos suffers too?

ORESTES : You genius friend, how I would love to see that!

PYLADES : Well, listen up.

ORESTES : I'm listening. I do want revenge.

PYLADES : Are these women trustworthy?

ORESTES : Yes they are friends.

PYLADES : How about we murder Helen? That would cause Menelaos pain.

ORESTES : How? I'm ready.

PYLADES : Cut her throat. Is she inside your house?

ORESTES : Yes. She's made it her own.

PYLADES : Not anymore. She's the bride of death now.

ORESTES : But how? She has slaves.

PYLADES : What sort of slaves? Mere Trojans don't scare me.

ORESTES : The sort who look after mirrors and perfumes.

PYLADES : You mean she's come *here* with all the luxuries of Troy?

ORESTES : I guess she finds culture in Greece a bit thin.

PYLADES : Well, free men against slaves, that's no problem.

ORESTES : I'd gladly die for this!

PYLADES : Likewise! I'll avenge you!

ORESTES : Explain your plan.

PYLADES : We go into the house pretending we're going to kill ourselves.

ORESTES : Okay.

PYLADES : We moan to Helen about our troubles.

ORESTES : Bring tears to her eyes—though she'll be laughing on the inside.

PYLADES : Exactly.

ORESTES : Then what?

PYLADES : We'll have swords ready under our clothing.

ORESTES : What about the slaves?

PYLADES : Lock them in another room.

ORESTES : Kill the ones who make noise.

PYLADES : After that it's obvious.

ORESTES : Death for Helen.

PYLADES : You got it. Because, here's my reasoning:

if we were assassinating someone respectable it would be different.  
But all Greeks want this whore taken out. She's virtually a mass murderer.

They'll call us heroes! No more "matricide" label for you.  
And it must not happen, it simply must not happen  
that Menelaos prospers from all this while you, your sister,  
your mother—well, I won't go there.  
Or that Menelaos has your house when it was Agamemnon  
got his wife back for him! God, how I long to put my sword through  
her throat!

But if we're somehow foiled we'll set fire to these buildings before  
we die.

Go out in a blaze of glory, safe or sorry!

CHORUS : She's a disgrace to her sex that Helen.

ORESTES : Nothing is better than a genuine friend!

Not wealth, not power, there is simply no equivalent.  
First you help me against Aigisthos, stand by me in danger,  
then you offer me revenge on my enemies—you're brilliant!  
But I won't go on praising, I know it gets onerous.  
I'll be breathing out my life here soon, I want to do my enemies  
down,  
repay their treachery, make them groan.  
I am Agamemnon's son. He ruled Greece by merit,  
not royal succession. And got strength from god.  
I will not shame him with a slave's death.

No, I'll die free. And punish Menelaos.  
Of course what I'd like is to kill without having to die.  
That would be ideal. I'll make that my prayer.  
Doesn't cost anything to fantasize.

ELEKTRA : I agree.  
Salvation for us all would be ideal.

ORESTES : But how?

ELEKTRA : Listen—*[to PYLADES]* you too.

ORESTES : Go on.

ELEKTRA : You know Helen's daughter?

ORESTES : Hermione, yes. My mother raised her.

ELEKTRA : She's gone with grave offerings on Helen's behalf.

ORESTES : So?

ELEKTRA : Take her hostage on her way back.

ORESTES : How will that save us?

ELEKTRA : When Helen's dead and Menelaos tries to do anything  
to you or me, tell him you'll kill Hermione. Hold a sword at her  
throat.

If he complies, if he's willing to save you, give the girl back.

If he blusters,

graze her throat with the sword.

I think he'll come round. He's no tough guy.

End of speech.

ORESTES : Elektra, you think like a man!  
You deserve to live not die.

What a wife you have lost in her, Pylades—or maybe not, if we  
survive!

PYLADES : If only that could happen!  
I'd bring her back to my hometown—big wedding,  
wedding songs, the whole thing.

ORESTES : But how soon will Hermione return here?

Your plan is excellent, provided we actually intercept her precious little self.

ELEKTRA : She should arrive anytime now.

ORESTES : Good, then you wait for her in front of the house, Elektra.

Keep watch in case anyone else shows up  
before we're finished killing—  
some uncle or ally of her father—  
let us know: bang on the door or send word in.  
As for us—into the house for the final test!  
Pylades, let's get our swords.

*[Turning away.]* O Father who dwells in the house of Night  
I call upon you, Orestes your son, I call you to come as my ally.

ELEKTRA : Yes Father, come to us. If you hear us. Your children invoke you.

We are about to die for your sake.

PYLADES : Agamemnon, kinsman of my father, hear my prayers.  
Save your children.

ORESTES : I killed my mother—

ELEKTRA : I touched his sword—

PYLADES : I urged him on, released him from fear.

ORESTES : We stood in your defense, Father—

ELEKTRA : we did not betray you!

PYLADES : Hearing these claims will you not save your children?

ORESTES : With my tears I pour you libation.

ELEKTRA : And I with my laments.

PYLADES : Enough! It's time to get on with the work.

If cries do penetrate the ground, he hears.  
Zeus and Justice, grant us victory!  
Three friends, one trial, one righteousness.  
Either to live or to die!



[Exit ORESTES and PYLADES.]

ELEKTRA : Dear women of Argos—

CHORUS : Yes, lady.

ELEKTRA : Stand you some by the road, some on the path by the house.

Keep watch for us.

CHORUS : Watch for what?

ELEKTRA : Lest someone come along in the midst of the bloodshed.

CHORUS A : Go, hurry, I'll guard this path facing east.

CHORUS B : And I this road facing west.

ELEKTRA : Swivel your eyes from this side to that.

CHORUS : We watch as you tell us.

ELEKTRA : Try to see everything.

CHORUS A : Who's that on the path? Some farmer comes near!

ELEKTRA : We're lost! He'll see us!

CHORUS A : Calm down, dear, he's gone. The path is empty.

ELEKTRA : [*Turning.*] What about your side? Is it still clear?

CHORUS B : All's well here.

CHORUS A : Same on this side. No one coming.

ELEKTRA : I'll put my ear to the door.

You in there, why so slow?

Get on with killing!

Ha, they're not listening. Ruin!

Faced with her beauty, do their swords go dull?

Soon some Argive will come racing to the rescue.

Take a better look now! No time to sit still!

You go this way, you go that.

CHORUS : We're watching in every direction.

*[Cry from within.]* O Argos, I am being murdered!

ELEKTRA : Hear that? The men are putting their hands in blood.

CHORUS : Sounds like Helen screaming.

ELEKTRA : O unfailing force of Zeus,  
come as our ally!

*[Cry from within.]* Menelaos, I am dying! Why aren't you here?

ELEKTRA : Strike her, slaughter her, ruin her, finish her off!

Slash with the two-edged sword that father-forsaking husband-forsaking cause of death cause of tears for so many good Greek men on the banks of the river of Troy!

CHORUS : Quiet, quiet, I hear the sound of someone coming near the house.

ELEKTRA : Dear women, here is Hermione into the midst of murder. Let's stop shouting.

She is going to walk straight into the net.

A fine catch, if we catch her!

Take up your stations, keep your face calm.

I'll have my eyes cast down as though I've no idea what's happening.

Hermione, have you come from Klytaimestra's grave?

Have you poured your libations?

HERMIONE : Yes, I've received her blessing. But I'm anxious—I heard an outcry from the house when I was quite far off.

ELEKTRA : Really? An outcry? Well, our situation deserves outcry.

HERMIONE : Do you have some news?

ELEKTRA : Death is decreed for Orestes and me.

HERMIONE : God forbid—you are my kin!

ELEKTRA : It is fixed. We stand in the yoke of necessity.

HERMIONE : Was that the reason for the shouting in the house?

ELEKTRA : Yes, he fell at Helen's knees in supplication.

HERMIONE : Who?

ELEKTRA : Poor Orestes.

HERMIONE : No wonder the house resounds.

ELEKTRA : Yes, no wonder. But won't you come and join our supplication  
to your mother? Menelaos is ready to kill us!

HERMIONE : Indeed I will come.  
May you be saved insofar as it rests with me.

*[Exit HERMIONE almost.]*

HERMIONE : Who is this?

ELEKTRA : Silence!

Salvation is here for us not you. Take her, take her, put the sword to her throat and hold it there!

So Menelaos knows he's dealing with men, not Trojan toyboys!

CHORUS : IO! IO! Women!

Stamp your feet, raise a song, cover the  
sounds in the house!

Lest the Argives run to help  
before I see, before I truly see  
Helen lying in her own blood  
or hear it from an eyewitness!

I know part of what happened, the rest is not clear.  
I know Justice came down from the gods against Helen—  
Helen who filled all Greece with tears

for the sake of that ruinous Paris and dragged the Greeks to Troy!

What's that sound?  
One of her Trojan entourage is coming out.

*[Enter TROJAN SLAVE.]*

SLAVE : I escaped from death, I escaped from doom—  
in my own dear little slippers  
I fled that room! O sisters!  
which way can I fly  
to the sea or the sky  
or a big dark underground hole  
to save my own dear little soul!

CHORUS : What are you saying, you barbarian flunky, what's going on?

SLAVE : Alas! Alas! My city is gone!  
Scraps of it remain not one!  
Alas for Troy! Alas for me!  
You know it's quite unique to be  
subject to so immoderate a catastrophe!  
And my dear little song will make you see  
Helen's to blame!  
Helen's your shame!  
That venge-kitty poison-pretty whore! Alas alas woe!

CHORUS : Can you just tell me what's happening inside?

SLAVE : Where I come from people say *bad shit happening*  
when they mean death.  
Another quaint barbarian idiom is *real bad*  
*shit happening*—  
that covers blood on the floors  
and a houseful of swords.  
Let's cut to the wail.  
You want some detail.  
Two Greek lions came into the house  
one an army brat the other street sharp  
but quiet as a mouse.  
*Him I did not trust*—snake eyes, you know?  
So all in tears, all humble, crouching low  
they come toward Helen from different angles.  
Meanwhile her bodyguards are busy  
rearranging their bangles—  
they can't figure whether or not it's a trick (your average bodyguard's  
not too quick).

CHORUS : Where are you at this point?

SLAVE : Well girls, as it happens, I'm wafting a breeze  
past her ladyship's knees  
and cooling her cheek with a big Trojan feather,  
while she works her fingers off at the loom  
making crimson cloth for Klytaimnestra's tomb.  
Then Orestes calls to her saying, "Helen dear,  
put down your weaving and come over here."  
He leads her, he leads her, she follows away and then it gets worse,  
Helen's bad day.  
The snaky guy jumps on the bodyguards snarling out his lips,  
*"You Trojan trash, I'll clip your tips!"*  
He shoves us into cupboards, locks up the links.  
Poor us, we were helpless! but we spy  
through the chinks.

CHORUS : What next?

SLAVE : Horror! Mayhem! Terrible! Alas!  
Bloodiness, lawlessness, evils came to pass!  
What I saw, what I saw, in the house of my lords—  
from out their own shadows those two pull  
their swords,  
one from one side, the other from the  
other,  
like wild mountain boars rushing out from  
cover,  
they stand facing the woman saying, *"You  
die!*  
*Your weak husband is why:  
he betrayed his own kin unto death."*  
She cries out *"Woe!"* and gasps for breath.  
Then claps her white arms over her face  
to beat a retreat out of that place.  
But Orestes flings his hand in her hair  
and yanks her back from going anywhere,  
ready to strike his sword into her deep—

CHORUS : So where are you and the guards, asleep?

SLAVE : The doorposts we crack with crowbars and a yell  
and run out into the room pell-mell,  
stones and slings and swords in hand  
but Pylades comes at us like a monster man.  
Then we join swords and things get

embarrassing  
(we're no match for Greeks at military  
harassing)—  
some fled, some dead, some begging for  
their lives  
and amidst all this Hermione arrives!  
They lunge at her, yelling,  
then remember Helen—  
who at that very moment simply vanishes  
from sight!  
O Zeus! O Light! O Dark of Night!  
I know not how!  
Truth is, at that point I made my bow.  
Panicked a bit, took to my heels.  
You know how it feels.

CHORUS : The weirdness goes on. It just goes on.  
Here's Orestes. Got his sword out. Looks pretty excited.

*[Enter ORESTES.]*

ORESTES : Where is that man who ran out of the house?

SLAVE : I bow before you, King, right to the ground in barbarian style.

ORESTES : This isn't Troy, we're in Argos.

SLAVE : Everywhere is a sweet place to escape death.

ORESTES : Have you been shouting for help for Menelaos?

SLAVE : No, no, no—help for you! I'm on your side!

ORESTES : So it was right and just that Helen perish?

SLAVE : Right and just three times over.

ORESTES : Your tongue wants to gratify. You don't really believe that.

SLAVE : Don't believe Helen screwed Greece as well as Troy? *Please.*

ORESTES : Swear you do, or I'll kill you.

SLAVE : I swear on my life! Is that convincing?

ORESTES : Was it like this at Troy—you Trojans all cringing in fear?

SLAVE : Please remove your blade from my throat. I don't like the glare.

ORESTES : Afraid of turning to stone? Like people who see the Gorgon?

SLAVE : Afraid of turning to corpse. What's a Gorgon?

ORESTES : Interesting, even a slave fears death—yet you could escape misery!

SLAVE : Every man, slave or free, loves to look upon the light.

ORESTES : Very poetic. Your eloquence has saved you. Go indoors.

SLAVE : You won't kill me?

ORESTES : Go.

SLAVE : Fabulous.

ORESTES : Unless I reconsider.

SLAVE : Not fabulous.

ORESTES : Oh you idiot, I can't be bothered cutting the throat of a eunuch.

I only came out to stop you setting up a hue and cry.

But I'm not afraid to fight Menelaos!

Bring him on, with his big blond hair and fancy looks!

If he leads the Argives against me he'll find two dead bodies, his wife and his daughter both.

*[Exit TROJAN SLAVE into the house.]*

CHORUS : Look how things fall!

Into agony, into another agony the house plunges  
dreadful and deep for the children of Atreus.

What should we do—take the news to the town?

Or keep silence—that's safer isn't it?

Look at the housefront how it dissolves—

smoke rising high in the air.  
They are lighting the torches, setting the fire  
and they do not shrink back though the  
work is dire!  
But some god controls all human outcomes.  
And vengeance is an overwhelming force.  
This house is finished.

Here comes Menelaos on sharp feet.  
He must have heard what is happening.  
Bolt the doors, Orestes. You've got the upper hand now!

*[Enter MENELAOS from a side entrance.]*

MENELAOS : I hear drastic deeds have been done by those two lions—  
they aren't human beings!  
That my wife is not dead but vanished away.  
Some silly rumor. Some tactic of Orestes'.  
Ludicrous.  
Open the doors!  
I'll rescue my daughter at least from murdering hands.

*[Enter ORESTES onto the roof of the house with PYLADES and HERMIONE.]*

ORESTES : Don't touch those doors!  
You there, Menelaos—you of the towering indignation, yes I mean  
you!—  
or I'll smash your skull with a copingstone. The doors are bolted  
fast. You're not rescuing anyone.

MENELAOS : EA! What's this! I see torches blazing, people looming on  
the roof and there's my daughter with a sword at her throat!

ORESTES : Do you want to ask questions or listen to me?

MENELAOS : Neither. But I guess I better listen.

ORESTES : It may interest you that I plan to kill your daughter.

MENELAOS : And you've already killed Helen?

ORESTES : I *wish*. No, the gods snatched her away.



MENELAOS : You mock me!

ORESTES : Unfortunately not. In fact I heartily regret—

MENELAOS : Regret what?

ORESTES : I didn't knock that unclean thing all the way to hell.

MENELAOS : Your mother's blood wasn't enough for you?

ORESTES : I could never tire of killing evil women.

MENELAOS : Return my wife's body so I can bury it.

ORESTES : Petition the gods. Meanwhile I'll go ahead with your daughter.

MENELAOS : The mother killer seeks to pile murder on murder!

ORESTES : The defender of a father, whom you betrayed to his death.

MENELAOS : And you, Pylades, you're part of this too?

ORESTES : Yes he is.

MENELAOS : And how will you get away? Intend to sprout wings?

ORESTES : We won't be leaving. We're going to set the house on fire.

MENELAOS : Lay waste your own ancestral home?

ORESTES : So you can't have it. And I'll slaughter your girl over the flames.

MENELAOS : Go ahead, kill her. I'll get my revenge.

ORESTES : So be it.

MENELAOS : *No don't do it!*

ORESTES : Oh be quiet. Endure what you deserve.

MENELAOS : And what do you deserve? To go on living?

ORESTES : Yes. And rule this land.

MENELAOS : Which land?

ORESTES : Argos.

MENELAOS : Oh that would be dandy wouldn't it, to have you touching sacred vessels!

ORESTES : Why not?

MENELAOS : And dispatching holy victims!

ORESTES : Whereas you'd be more suitable?

MENELAOS : My hands are clean.

ORESTES : Your mind is not.

MENELAOS : But who would want to have anything to do with you?

ORESTES : Anyone who loves his father.

MENELAOS : And those who respect their mother?

ORESTES : Lucky them.

MENELAOS : Doesn't apply to you.

ORESTES : I don't care for bad women.

MENELAOS : Take your sword away from my daughter.

ORESTES : You're a tricky one aren't you.

MENELAOS : You will really kill her!

ORESTES : You got that right.

MENELAOS : OIMOI! What should I do!

ORESTES : Go to the Argives and plead—

MENELAOS : What?

ORESTES : For our lives.

MENELAOS : Or you'll murder my child?

ORESTES : That's it.

MENELAOS : O poor Helen—

ORESTES : What about poor Orestes?

MENELAOS : I brought you back from Troy unto death.

ORESTES : If only it were so.

MENELAOS : After all those toils—

ORESTES : None of them for me.

MENELAOS : I suffer terrible things.

ORESTES : Well, you screwed up.

MENELAOS : You've got me now.

ORESTES : You got yourself. You're no good, Menelaos. A born coward. Elektra, start that fire down below! Pylades, you light the parapet here.

MENELAOS : O Argos, O citizens of Argos,  
won't you come to my rescue?

This man is forcing his will upon your whole community—hanging on to life though he's soaked in his mother's blood!

*[Enter APOLLO with HELEN, above somewhere.]*

APOLLO : Menelaos, soften your temper—

I am Phoibos Apollo, son of Leto, who calls you close at hand—you too, Orestes, with your sword at this girl's throat.

I have this to say.

Helen, whom you were so hot to kill, is here. In the heavens. I saved her from your sword. Zeus' orders.

She is after all Zeus' daughter. Can't die.

She will sit in the folds of the sky beside Kastor and Pollux.

Sort of a savior for sailors.

Find another wife, Menelaos.

This one, by her beauty, was a mechanism of the gods to kill off a lot of Trojans and Greeks, lighten the burden of excess population on the earth.

So much for Helen.

Now you, Orestes, get out of this country. Cross the border, go to Parrhasia, stay there a year.

They'll call the place *Oresteion* after you. Then go to Athens and stand trial for matricide.

Trust me, you'll win.

And this girl whose throat is being grazed by your sword, Hermione, you'll marry.

I know she's supposed to marry somebody else (Neoptolemos I think) but I'll see to it he dies.

Give your sister to Pylades, as you agreed. His life will be happy. And Argos—Menelaos—let Orestes rule it.

You go rule Sparta.

Enjoy your wife's dowry.

She's finished philandering now.

I'll fix up Orestes' relations with Argos—it was me made him murder his mother after all.

ORESTES : Apollo of oracles! So you were no false prophet!

But I admit I was getting nervous.

Those voices, I thought they were demons of vengeance, not you!

Still, it's all turned out well. I do obey you.

See, I'm letting Hermione go. And will marry her as soon as her father says yes.

MENELAOS : Helen, daughter of Zeus, I hail you!

And congratulate you on your promotion to heaven!

Orestes, I give you the hand of my daughter. As Apollo ordains.

Noble bride, from a noble father,

I hope you prosper. I hope I do too.

APOLLO : Go your ways as I've assigned them. End these differences.

MENELAOS : No choice but to obey.

ORESTES : So it is.

I make my peace with circumstances, Menelaos, and also with your oracles, Apollo.

APOLLO : Go then, honoring Peace, most beautiful of gods.

I will lead Helen to the halls of Zeus crossing the starry bowl of the sky. There, with Hera and Herakles and Hebe, she will preside as a god, honored by humans, queen of the deep running sea.

CHORUS : O great Victory, holy god, may you inhabit my life and never cease crowning me with beautiful success!

# A NOTE FROM THE TRANSLATOR

*Thunder only happens when it's raining.*

—STEVIE NICKS

Not my idea to do this. It was the inspiration of the artistic director of the Classic Stage Company in New York City, Brian Kulick. Let me say how it came about.

I translated Sophokles' *Elektra* in 1987 and Euripides' *Orestes* in 2006 for different reasons: *Elektra* was commissioned by Oxford University Press for a series called *The Greek Tragedies in New Translations*; *Orestes* was presented as a staged reading at the 92nd Street Y in New York City. To translate Aiskhylos' *Agamemnon* had never crossed my mind. But in 2007 Brian Kulick approached me with the notion of trying my hand at *Agamemnon* and putting together an *Oresteia* that combined the three playwrights, which he would then undertake to produce. I said, "Who needs this?"—meaning, Aiskhylos has already given us an *Oresteia* richer than rubies, of which lots of good translations exist. Why monkey around with it? But Kulick persisted in thinking it a good idea to make a non-foundational *Oresteia*. He spoke and wrote to me about this on several occasions. As I understand it, the project interested him first of all historically. To hear the same legend (the story of the house of Atreus) told by three different playwrights at three different vantage points of Athenian history would offer "a unique perspective on the Athenian moment," he said. Kulick saw a trajectory "from myth to mockery" in the three treatments.

*In Aiskhylos' hands the story of the house of Atreus is designed to end in a valedictory celebration of Athenian democracy and its newborn sense of justice; when Sophokles takes over the tale it becomes more complex and contradictory; with Euripides the design is completely turned on its head. We follow a trajectory from myth to mockery. What happened to effect this? History happened. Aiskhylos composed his Oresteia shortly after Athens' victory at the*

*battle of Marathon, which marked the height of Athenian military and cultural supremacy; Euripides finished his Orestes almost a hundred years later as Athens headed for ruin, due to her protracted involvement in the Peloponnesian War ... The house of Atreus, for these tragedians, was a way of talking about the fate of Athens.*<sup>14</sup>

He was also intrigued by a stylistic differential in the three plays.

*I always think of these three tragedians as being associated with different times of a metaphoric day. Aiskhylos is dawnlike, with iconic ideas, images, and action emerging into the light of consciousness. Euripides presents a twilight where everything is susceptible to tricks of a fading light, where tonalities are hard to grasp, where one moment is an azure sunset, the next a starless night. Between them, Sophokles, under the glare of a noon sun that leaves nothing unexposed.*<sup>15</sup>

You can see Brian was persuasive. Anyway, the idea of another *Oresteia* grew on me, partly because I like big translation projects; partly because it seems important to get Greek plays performed more; partly because, as John Cage says, “There are things to hear and things to see and that’s what theater is.”<sup>16</sup>

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# Notes

1

Scholars do not agree on what this cloth is exactly—a carpet, several carpets, a pile of garments or just bolts of fabric. From what Agamemnon says, it is clear he thinks the cloth something exorbitant with which gods should be honored, not men. See J. D. Denniston and D. L. Page, eds., *Agamemnon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957), 148.

2

David Sylvester, *The Brutality of Fact: Interviews with Francis Bacon* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1988), 56.

3

*Ibid.*, 59.

4

*Ibid.*, 82.

5

*Ibid.*, 178.

6

Oliver Taplin, *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 34, 280, 300, 307, 339–41.

7

I have written about this elsewhere: see “Screaming in Translation,” in Peter Burian and Alan Shapiro, eds., *Sophocles: Electra* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 41–48.

8

The production was directed by Deborah Warner and played in London, Paris, Bradford, Glasgow and Derry in the early 1990s. See Fiona Shaw, “Electra Speechless,” in Francis M. Dunn, ed., *Sophocles’ Electra in Performance* (Stuttgart, 2001), 131–38.

9

*Ibid.*, 136.

10

Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights* 6.5, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927), 35–37.

11

See Mark Ringer, *Elektra and the Empty Urn: Metatheater and Role Playing in Sophocles* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), and further bibliography there.

12

“Every poem is a misinterpretation of a parent poem,” says Harold Bloom in *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977). Bloom doesn’t quite believe in homage.

13

It is the first stanza of Auden’s preface to *The Sea and the Mirror*. In W. H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Knopf, 1991), 401.

14

Brian Kulick, correspondence, somewhat adapted.

15

Ibid.

16

Richard Kostelanetz, ed., *John Cage: An Anthology* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1991), 22.

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